

NANCY DREW®

THE SECRET IN THE DARK

CAROLYN KEENE

ALL NEW! FIRST TIME PUBLISHED

102

A CASE OF STAGE FRIGHT
LEADS TO A
SYMPHONY OF TERROR



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Stage Fright

“Nancy, are you sure we’re not on a case?” Bess Marvin asked nervously. “I feel like we’re in a high-speed car chase.”

Laughing at her friend’s question, eighteen-year-old Nancy Drew gripped the hand strap above the door as the taxicab swerved to the right. Bess wasn’t crazy about the dangerous side of the many mysteries she had helped Nancy investigate.

“You *did* tell the driver to step on it, didn’t you?” Nancy pointed out to her friend.

“That was a mistake,” Bess replied, adjusting her blond ponytail.

The cab whipped around a large van and slipped between two other cars.

“Just wanted to get us out of this airport traffic,” the driver said over his shoulder. “The highway should clear up soon.”

“Could you take us through the city?” Bess asked. “We wanted to see some of it before we meet our friend.”

“It’ll add time to the ride,” the driver said with a shrug.

“We don’t mind,” Nancy said.

Bess pressed her foot against an imaginary brake pedal as the taxi came dangerously close to a large truck.

“All right,” the driver said cheerfully. “I’ll take this turnoff right here.” With barely a glance, he crossed two lanes and sped down an exit ramp, then turned left.

Nancy and Bess tightened their grips on the hand straps and leaned back in their seats.

“Okay, ladies,” said the driver, slowing down the taxi. “We’re heading north on Fourth Avenue, fifteen minutes from downtown.”

As the driver drove toward the city he listed the sights. "You've got your Pioneer Square, Pike Place Market, Puget Sound, all surrounded by mountain ranges." Looking back at Nancy and Bess, he asked, "What more could you ask for in a city? Welcome to Seattle."

Nancy smiled as she slowly released her grip on the hand strap. Letting out a sigh of relief, she said, "Thanks."

"The name's Blue. Tommy Blue," the driver said. He flashed the girls a warm smile.

"Have you lived here long?" Nancy asked.

"Most of my life," Tommy answered, stopping at an intersection. "Although I've traveled a lot. I'm really a musician—saxophone."

Nancy watched an old-fashioned trolley car cross the taxi's path and head up a hill to the right.

"You should ride one of those while you're here," Tommy said. "It'll take you toward Chinatown." When the light changed the cab shot forward with a jerk.

"As I was saying," the driver continued, "I can play all styles of music, but I'm really into jazz. You two like music?"

"Sure," Bess said.

"It's funny you should mention music," Nancy said. "We're in town to visit a friend who's a violinist."

"She's studying at the Sabatini Conservatory of Music," Bess added.

"Your friend must be pretty good," Tommy said. "I hear it's tough getting into the conservatory, and even tougher to stick with the program."

"Deirdre's great!" Bess glowed with pride. "She took private lessons in high school, and even her teacher told her—" She stopped, looking a little embarrassed. "I guess I'm giving you Deirdre's whole life story."

"Doesn't bother me," Tommy said. "I like to hear about people."

"Well, I didn't mean to go on like that," Bess apologized. Then she turned to Nancy. "It's going to be so great seeing Deirdre

after all this time.”

“I know,” Nancy agreed. “It’s been three years since she moved away from River Heights. Right after that terrible accident.”

Bess’s blue eyes suddenly looked very sad. “Do you think she’ll be different?”

Nancy shook her head. “I doubt it. She sounds like the same old Deirdre in her letters.”

“What kind of accident was it?” Tommy asked, cutting around a bus.

“A car accident,” Nancy said quietly.

Tommy slowed down the cab. “Sorry,” was all he said.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, passing beautiful old buildings, decorative lampposts, and even some cobblestone streets. For a few minutes, Nancy felt as though she were back in the nineteenth century. Then the taxi headed into the bustling, modern downtown area.

Skyscrapers rose high above their heads. Some were colored salmon pink or gold, with pyramid-shaped towers.

The streets running east to west reminded Nancy of San Francisco. The steep hills rose to the blue horizon, then slipped down toward the shimmering bay. Nancy thought Seattle was a beautiful city.

“Deirdre will be surprised to see us,” Bess said as the cab passed under a monorail track. “I hope she’ll have time to show us around. Seattle is gorgeous.”

Nancy shook her head. “With the competition only two days away, I doubt Deirdre will have time for anything else.”

“Your friend’s in that big contest?” Tommy asked. They were leaving the downtown area now.

“She sure is,” Bess replied. “Deirdre will be playing against the best musicians in the school. And we’ll be there to cheer her on.”

“Well, wish her luck for me, too,” Tommy said. “And here we are.”

The cab turned onto a tree-lined street and pulled up in front of a large three-story building. A bronze plaque by the front door read Sabatini Conservatory of Music. Ivy grew along the walls, framing the tall, narrow windows. The gray stone structure resembled a miniature castle. Behind this were three smaller stone buildings that formed a square compound with a garden in the center.

Tommy placed the girls' luggage on the sidewalk. "You sure you don't want me to take you to your hotel first?" he asked.

"No, thanks," Nancy said, paying the fare. "We were planning to pick out a place after we got here."

"Okay then." Tommy quickly slipped into his cab. "You're on your own."

"It was nice meeting you," Bess said. "I'll never forget that ride."

"Maybe we'll do it again," Tommy said with a wave. "You never know."

"I can't wait," Bess muttered as the cab roared off down the street. It just missed a silver limousine parked by the school. The burly chauffeur inside glared at the passing cab.

Nancy quickly ran a comb through her reddish blond hair. "Come on," she said, eagerness showing in her blue eyes. "Let's find Deirdre."

The girls wheeled their luggage toward the entrance of the building and found themselves in a long corridor with marble floors and high ceilings. Students raced past them, carrying instrument cases of varying sizes. A banner hanging across the hall read Sabatini's 25th Annual Competition of Excellence.

"Everyone seems to be in a big hurry," Bess said. "Should we ask for the main office or Deirdre?"

"Let's ask for Deirdre first," Nancy suggested.

Soon they found a group of students who told them Deirdre was practicing in the auditorium. A girl with long brown hair gave them directions to an isolated wing of the building.

"This must be it," Bess said as she and Nancy approached a set of large double doors.

Just then, one of the doors swung open. A tall man with a wide forehead and thin brown hair stepped out, blocking their way.

“May I help you?” he said in a severe tone.

“We were told we could find Deirdre Thompson here,” Nancy said.

The man closed the door behind him, never taking his eyes off them. “And who are you?”

“I’m Nancy Drew, and this is Bess Marvin.” Nancy extended her hand. “And you are . . . ?”

“Professor Jorgenson,” he replied. His handshake was quick and firm.

“We’re friends of Deirdre,” Nancy explained.

The professor frowned. “I suppose you’re here to watch the competitions.”

“Oh, yes,” said Bess. “We wanted to—”

“Then you know how important it is that Deirdre’s practice not be disturbed,” he said.

“Oh, we won’t disturb her,” Nancy said politely.

“You won’t if you wait until she is finished,” the man said.

Nancy and Bess glanced at each other. “We understand,” Nancy said calmly.

“Good,” the professor replied. Then he walked past the girls and down the hall.

“He sure didn’t want us to go in there,” Bess said. “Did you see how quickly he closed those doors?”

“I guess he’s having a bad day,” Nancy said with a shrug.

“Well, are we going to wait out here for Deirdre?”

“No,” said Nancy with a grin. “Professor Jorgenson didn’t want us to disturb Deirdre. He didn’t say we couldn’t sneak in quietly and listen.”

Bess chuckled as she and Nancy slipped inside.

The auditorium was dim, with only a few lights illuminating the stage. The sound of Deirdre’s violin filled the room. Deirdre stood on the stage, playing a demanding composition. Her body

swayed with the energy of her strong, quick bow strokes. The music soared from low, resonant tones to high, thrilling notes.

Nancy felt chills run through her body. "Deirdre's even better than she was in high school," she said softly.

"She's fantastic," Bess whispered. "She'll win the competition for sure."

As Deirdre played on, Nancy and Bess crept farther down the aisle. They stopped as Deirdre struck a beautiful high note. She froze the note for a second, then slowly, softly, let it fade away.

Bess couldn't contain herself any longer. She burst into wild applause and cheers.

"That was beautiful!" Nancy called out, clapping as hard as she could. "Deirdre, you're amazing."

The girl stood very still, her almond-shaped eyes expressionless. Then her face suddenly lit up with joy.

"Bess? Nancy?" she called excitedly. As her two friends mounted the stage, Deirdre took a few steps forward.

Suddenly, Nancy saw that a trapdoor on the floor only a few feet in front of Deirdre had been left open. From where she stood Nancy could see only dark empty space below the opening. And in another moment Deirdre would fall straight down into the gaping black hole!

A Face at the Window

“Deirdre, stop!” Nancy yelled as she raced toward her friend. The young musician had already stepped off into space. She dropped her violin and bow, desperately grasping air, and screamed as she fell through the opening. Her arms landed on the stage floor in front of her, preventing her from falling all the way through.

Nancy leaped and grabbed Deirdre’s arms, and within seconds Bess was by her side.

Bess reached down and gripped Deirdre by her belt. Below the struggling girl, Bess could just make out the floor, eight or ten feet down.

Nancy and Bess pulled with all their strength. Slowly, the two of them managed to hoist their friend to safety.

Deirdre sat up quickly and frantically turned left and right. “My violin,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “Is it broken?”

Nancy picked up the instrument and looked at it carefully. “It’s a little scratched, but nothing is broken. How about you?”

“Are you hurt?” Bess asked anxiously, brushing back a lock of Deirdre’s long black hair.

“I don’t think so,” Deirdre said, shuddering. “But I would have been if it hadn’t been for you guys.”

“What a careless thing for someone to do,” Nancy said angrily.

Deirdre stood up and, with her friends’ help, slowly walked to a nearby table. “It’s not the first time something like this has happened to me lately,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked, placing the violin on the table.

Deirdre sighed heavily. “In the past few days, a ladder nearly fell on me and a car just missed me in the parking lot. Then someone put a mop and pail near the top of the stairs at my apartment house.”

Bess looked slightly uncomfortable. “Maybe those were just things you didn’t notice because—” Her voice trailed away.

Deirdre understood what Bess was trying to say. “You mean I might not have noticed them because I’m blind?”

“We know you can get around by yourself,” Nancy said, “but you can’t always—”

“I know what you mean,” Deirdre interrupted. “And you’re right. I was a klutz before the accident took my sight, and I still am—sometimes. But trust me, all this is more than just clumsiness.”

“Do you think someone is trying to hurt you?” Nancy asked.

“I’m not sure,” Deirdre said. “Maybe it’s all someone’s idea of a joke.”

“That’s a pretty sick sense of humor,” Bess said angrily.

Nancy turned toward the backstage area. “I’d like to have a look at the controls for that trapdoor.”

“They’re somewhere over there.” Deirdre pointed to the left side of the stage.

“How’d you know that?” Bess asked, handing Deirdre her bow.

“I practice here alone a lot, so I had someone show me around.” Deirdre placed her violin and bow in their case, then put on a pair of tinted glasses. “In my world, it helps to know your territory.”

“I think I’ll take a look around,” Nancy said.

“I’ll come with you.” Deirdre picked up her walking stick and took Nancy’s arm.

The three girls made their way through the velvet curtains and along the left wall. Nancy spotted a row of numbered levers near a door with an exit sign above it.

A web of ropes led from the levers up to a series of heavy weights. More ropes and cables ran from the weights up to the

ceiling and down through the floor.

One lever, marked Trapdoor 6—Center Stage, was in the open position.

When Nancy pushed the lever up, she heard the trapdoor close with a faint click. “Did anyone else come in during your practice session?”

“Not that I know of,” Deirdre said. “But when I’m playing, I hardly hear anything but my violin. I don’t know who was in here before me, either.”

Bess folded her arms across her chest. “We know one person who was in here. That Professor Jorgenson.”

Deirdre seemed surprised. “The professor was here?”

“That’s right,” Nancy replied as she examined the levers and ropes. “He stopped us at the door when we arrived. And he told us not to interrupt you.”

“He’s not the nicest guy I ever met,” Bess added.

Deirdre nodded. “That’s part of the reason I transferred out of his class.”

Nancy heard the strange tone in Deirdre’s voice, even though the girl’s attention was drawn elsewhere. Deirdre seemed to be staring at the door. Nancy glanced over at it and noticed that the knob was turning slowly, as if someone was trying to enter silently.

Nancy signaled Bess to be quiet. Then she whispered a warning in Deirdre’s ear.

The three girls stood perfectly still as the door opened inch by inch. Suddenly, Nancy stepped forward and yanked it wide open.

A startled blond girl stood in the doorway. She was dressed in jeans and a bulky red sweater and carried a violin case. Her face was long and narrow, almost frail, but her hazel eyes blazed with defiance.

“Who are you?” Nancy asked.

“Who are *you* to ask me questions?” she demanded.

“My name’s Nancy Drew,” Nancy replied calmly. “I’m a friend of Deirdre Thompson’s.”

The girl's eyes narrowed. "That figures," she said.

Deirdre recognized the voice. "Brie Hollister," she said with a sigh. "If you want to rehearse here, I'm finished."

As Brie brushed past Nancy and entered the theater, she said, "How gracious of you."

"Excuse me," Nancy said. "How long were you outside this door?"

"I just got here," Brie replied. She didn't look at Nancy as she walked out onto the stage.

Nancy followed her. "Did you see anyone coming out of here as you arrived?" she asked.

Brie placed a hand on her hip and looked Nancy up and down. "Who are you, Deirdre's security guard?"

"Hey!" Bess exclaimed.

"Someone left one of the trapdoors open," Nancy said. "Deirdre almost fell through it. I just wondered if you saw anyone around."

The expression on Brie's face seemed to change, but Nancy couldn't be sure what the girl was thinking.

Brie began removing her violin from its case. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said softly. "But I didn't see anyone. Now, if you'll excuse me, some of us have to practice for the competition."

"Come on, guys," Deirdre said. "Let's give Brie her privacy." She gathered up her things, and the three girls left through a side exit.

"What was her problem?" Bess muttered, once they were out in the hall.

Nancy looked concerned. "She did seem a bit on the sour side. Is there a problem between you two?" she asked Deirdre.

Deirdre shrugged. "I'll tell you all about Ms. Brie Hollister later," she replied. "Right now, we have to get you two settled at my place," she added cheerfully. "By the way, where are your bags?"

"We left them at the back of the auditorium," Nancy said. "And we were planning to find a hotel in the area."

“No way!” Deirdre exclaimed. “You’re staying with me. And I want to know what case brought you to Seattle.”

“We’re not on a case,” Nancy said with a laugh. “We’re here to see you play in the competition.”

Deirdre looked stunned. “You came all this way just to see *me*?”

“You told us that family and friends could come to these events,” Bess said. “Don’t we qualify?”

Deirdre grinned. “You sure do,” she said. “Come on, let’s go home.”

Deirdre could find her own way to her apartment, which was only a few blocks from the conservatory. The neighborhood was made up of tree-lined streets with cozy little shops and cafés. College students and couples with children strolled along the main street.

Deirdre lived on the top floor of a three-story building. The one-room studio had a kitchenette, a brass bed on the far side of the room, a couch, a small table, and three chairs. A large window overlooked the quiet street. Through the skylight, the setting sun threw a reddish glow across one wall.

“My room isn’t this neat even after I clean,” Nancy said, looking around.

“My room never looks like this, either,” Bess added. “How do you do it, Didi?” she asked, using her friend’s nickname.

“Well, I can’t leave things lying around,” Deirdre said. She placed her cane in a stand by the door and walked straight to the couch. “I’d either lose them or trip over them. Come on, sit down and be comfortable.”

The girls left their suitcases by the door, and Bess immediately dropped down on the couch.

Without hesitation, Deirdre walked over to the kitchen area. It held a sink, a microwave oven, and a small refrigerator tucked into a narrow space.

“I’ll start dinner,” Deirdre said. “I make a wicked tuna casserole. Meanwhile, you can tell me what’s going on back in River Heights.”

“Okay,” Bess said. “Nancy will tell you all the facts, and I’ll give you the juicy gossip.”

“Sounds great,” Deirdre said, laughing.

For the next few hours, the girls talked, ate, laughed, and talked some more.

Daylight faded slowly in the picture window. It was almost nine o’clock before Deirdre began turning on the apartment lights.

“It took a while for me to get used to being blind,” she said, standing by the window. “Not just getting around, but also using my other senses more.”

“You mean your hearing?” Nancy asked.

“And my senses of smell and touch,” Deirdre replied. “Learning to read words and music in Braille was a challenge, believe me.” Deirdre sat down on the floor in front of the couch. “Imagine reading a whole book or an entire piece of music as a series of little bumps on sheets of paper.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” Nancy said.

“Then I had to learn organization,” Deirdre continued. “Setting up my habits, my home, and work space so that I always knew where things were. It was so hard at first.”

“I could never learn to do that,” Bess said.

“Sure you could,” Deirdre replied. “I’ll show you. Pick a part of the room you want to get to. Study it, then turn out the lights. You, too, Nancy.”

Nancy and Bess looked closely at the room, then turned off the lights. The room was quite dark, except for the moonlight filtering in through the thin curtains.

“I can still see a bit,” Bess said.

“Squint,” Deirdre told her. “Most visually impaired people have partial vision, you know. They can see things as dark shadows and shapes.”

“Okay,” Bess said nervously. “I’m squinting.”

“Me, too,” Nancy said. “I can barely see a thing.”

“Okay, you two,” Deirdre went on. “Visualize the room and the path you have to walk, then go.”

Bess hesitated for a moment, then began to move forward slowly.

“Ouch!” she exclaimed as she bumped into something.

“The couch,” Deirdre said instantly.

“How did you know that?” Bess asked.

“The muffled thud,” Deirdre replied. “Besides,” she added with a chuckle, “I’ve done it a few times myself.”

Nancy stood quietly, listening. She heard Deirdre breathing next to her, the sounds filtering in from the street, and Bess continuing her slow trek across the room in the dark.

But then Nancy heard something else. A faint crunching sound, like someone walking on gravel.

Nancy opened her eyes. “Deirdre, do you hear . . . ?”

“That noise?” Deirdre said softly. “Yes, I do. And it’s not the first time.”

“It sounds as if it’s coming from the skylight,” Nancy said, looking up. There, backlit by a bright full moon, was the black silhouette of a crouching figure. Someone was watching the girls!

A Note of Warning

“Get away from there or we’ll call the police!” Nancy shouted.

In an instant, the figure vanished from view and only the moon could be seen through the skylight.

“What’s happening?” Deirdre asked.

“Someone was watching us through the skylight,” Nancy explained as she rushed to the door. “How do I get up on the roof?”

“The ladder is just down the hall,” Deirdre said. “Please be careful.”

“I will,” Nancy called back through the doorway. “Bess, stay with Deirdre.”

Nancy ran down the short hallway and found a metal ladder attached to the wall. Above it was a bolted door.

Quickly, she climbed the ladder, unlatched the bolt, and threw open the door. Then she climbed cautiously onto the roof.

She could see fairly well in the blue-gray light of the moon. Except for a small chimney and two raised skylights, the roof was empty.

Then Nancy heard a dull thump coming from the side of the building. She hurried to the ledge and looked over.

There was a fire escape just below her, and a shadowy form was climbing down the stairs. Before Nancy could move, the figure leaped from the bottom landing and disappeared into the darkness.

Disappointed, Nancy returned to Deirdre’s apartment.

“Did you see anyone?” Deirdre asked anxiously as Nancy sat down on the couch.

“Just a shape,” Nancy said. She quickly described what had happened. “I couldn’t even tell if it was a man or woman.”

“That’s really weird,” Bess said. “Why would somebody spy on you, Deirdre?”

Deirdre absentmindedly plucked at her violin. “I don’t know. It’s not the first time I’ve heard someone on the roof. But I always thought it was one of my neighbors, stargazing.” Deirdre’s voice trailed away.

“Don’t worry,” Nancy said, trying to sound comforting. “We gave them a good scare. I doubt they’ll come back.”

“I hope not,” Deirdre said. “But I can’t help wondering if this ties in with all the other strange things that have been happening to me lately.”

Nancy sat down next to Deirdre. “When did all these incidents start?” she asked.

“About a week ago.”

“Has anything in your life changed in the past week?” Nancy asked. “Anything at all?”

Deirdre hesitated. “Well, yes and no. I mean, the competition has changed everything and everybody,” she went on. “The faculty is excited, and all the students are tense.”

“Is that why Brie Hollister acted the way she did?” Nancy asked.

“Brie is always uptight,” Deirdre said. “She thinks the world owes her something. And worse, she thinks I have some kind of edge in the competition.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

“I guess I wrote to you that I’d met Raymond Wells, right?” Deirdre said.

“You sure did,” Bess replied. “He’s one of the richest men in America!”

“That’s right,” Deirdre replied. “Which makes things even more difficult. Mr. Wells took an interest in my playing during his visits to the conservatory. Now he’s become like an uncle to me.”

“That’s great,” Nancy said. “I’ve read that Mr. Wells hardly ever goes anywhere.”

“That’s true,” Deirdre said. “Mostly he only travels from his mansion, near Mount Rainier, to his office in town, then home again. But he’s the major benefactor of the conservatory. In fact, he donated most of the money for the competition.”

“So Brie dislikes you because you’re a friend of Mr. Wells?” Bess asked.

“Maybe,” Deirdre replied. “But the way things have been going, I’m not sure if Mr. Wells and I really are friends.”

Nancy noticed the sad expression on Deirdre’s face. “Is there a problem?” she asked.

Deirdre sighed. “I don’t know. Lately Mr. Wells has been acting kind of distant, as if I’d offended him or something.”

“Maybe he’s trying not to show favoritism during the competition,” Bess suggested.

Deirdre nodded. “Maybe you’re right. There’s a lot at stake.”

“What does the winner receive?” Nancy asked.

“A fifteen-thousand-dollar study grant.”

Nancy whistled softly. “That’s quite a prize, all right.” She twirled a strand of her reddish blond hair as she recalled the open trapdoor on the stage. “Someone might pull a few vicious pranks to eliminate any challengers.”

“That rules out that professor,” Bess said. “He wouldn’t have anything to gain by doing that.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Nancy asked.

Deirdre shook her head. “Old Professor Jorgenson is a real perfectionist. He’s also pushy, insulting, and unreasonable if you don’t do things his way.”

“That must make him very unpopular,” Bess said.

“I guess it depends,” Deirdre replied. “Brie seems to like him. Anyway, why don’t we let all of this go for now,” she went on. “The competition starts the day after tomorrow, and I have to be ready for it. I shouldn’t be worrying about anything else.”

“You’re right,” Nancy said. “And while you’re practicing, Bess and I will see the city.”

“Maybe when you’re free you can show us around a bit,” Bess added.

“I’d love to,” Deirdre said. “I have to be at school very early tomorrow. But we can go somewhere nice for lunch.”

“Sounds good to us,” Nancy said.

Deirdre stood up and went to her telephone. “I’ll see if my parents can join us. They know Seattle fairly well, and we can map out a nice sight-seeing tour for you.”

“Make sure you include some good seafood restaurants,” Bess said eagerly.

Deirdre nodded. “You’ll have to sample some salmon while you’re here.” She flipped up the lid of her watch and ran one finger across its face. “It’s not too late. I’ll call my folks and set up lunch for tomorrow. Then we can turn in.”

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were delighted to hear Nancy and Bess were in town. They agreed to meet the girls at a restaurant in Pike Place Market the next day.

Later, though all was quiet, Nancy couldn’t fall asleep right away. Her mind was racing. Was her friend simply having a run of bad luck? Was her nervousness about the competition causing the accidents? Or was Deirdre really in some kind of danger?

By the time her eyes finally began to close, Nancy had made a decision. She was determined to find the answers to those questions, no matter what.

• • •

“Come on,” Nancy urged as she and Bess hurried along the conservatory hallways. “We’ve already missed part of the tour. Deirdre said she’d find us with the rest of the tour group.”

“I’m hurrying,” Bess replied breathlessly. “I don’t know how we overslept. Deirdre said she’d reset her alarm for us.”

“She did,” Nancy said. She glanced back at Bess. “But someone turned it off.”

“Oops.” Bess grinned. “Sorry.”

The girls caught up with the tour group as they were leaving the auditorium.

“Well, at least we’ve seen that already,” Bess said.

The tour was being led by a short, dark-haired woman wearing a fashionable suit. Though she was stocky in frame, she walked very quickly. Her voice was forceful yet friendly.

“For those of you who have just joined us,” she said politely, “I am the headmistress, Janice Leggio. Welcome to the Sabatini Conservatory of Music.”

She spoke about the history of the school as she led the group into a large, brightly lit room. Along the walls were glass display cases. Each one contained a musical instrument from a different era, country, or culture.

“This is our Hall of Excellence,” Ms. Leggio said proudly. “Many of these instruments are priceless. A few belonged to some of history’s greatest musicians. If you’ll notice—” Ms. Leggio made a sweeping gesture with her hand. At that moment, her voice seemed to falter.

Nancy glanced around the crowd and saw a tall, thin, brown-haired man standing near one of the display cases. He was wearing a tailored gray suit and carried an expensive-looking coat over his arm. Though he appeared calm, something about him made Nancy think he was in a great hurry.

Ms. Leggio seemed to sense that also, because she suddenly cut her speech short. “This exhibit is here by the gracious courtesy of Mr. Raymond Wells,” she said quickly. “Please feel free to look around for a few minutes. Then we’ll move on to the garden.”

As the small crowd of guests began to circle the room, the well-dressed man approached Ms. Leggio.

Nancy and Bess were standing nearby, examining a cello. They couldn’t help overhearing the conversation.

“So nice to see you, Mr. Peters,” the headmistress said. “I hope you approve of our new display for the instruments from Australia.”

“It’s quite nice,” he replied. “I’ll have someone pick up the harpsichord in a few days. Now, your message at the office suggested that you had a problem.”

Ms. Leggio appeared uncomfortable. "I have a few questions about the competitions," she said in a low voice. "The judging, the awards, the ceremony itself."

Mr. Peters raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"In the past I have spoken directly to Mr. Wells about these matters," Ms. Leggio continued. "But he doesn't seem to be returning my calls."

Mr. Peters sighed. "I'm so sorry about that," he replied. "Mr. Wells has been very busy these past few days. He has just acquired a unique piece for his musical instrument collection. The arrangements have—"

"You mean he bought the Stradivarius?" came an excited voice. Deirdre had stepped up just behind Mr. Peters. The expression on the man's face showed he was alarmed.

"Yes," he said after looking quickly around the room.

"That's wonderful," Deirdre said. "He told me over a month ago that he was trying to buy it."

"A Stradivarius!" Ms. Leggio seemed very pleased by the news. "One of the rarest and most valuable violins in the world. I don't suppose we might display it here in the conservatory," she added hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," Mr. Peters replied. "This particular instrument is priceless. Mr. Wells will keep it at his estate when it arrives. It is being delivered in total secrecy and under the tightest security." The man turned to Deirdre. "In fact, I think Mr. Wells would have preferred that this not have been mentioned in public."

Nancy studied Mr. Peters's expression. It was apparent that he wanted the violin delivery kept secret and she saw that Deirdre felt bad about her mistake. She seemed to shrivel at the sound of his words.

"I didn't mean—" she began.

"Of course you didn't," Mr. Peters said. "But the damage has been done." He glanced at Nancy and Bess. "You have drawn an audience."

Nancy and Bess walked over and stood by Deirdre. “We couldn’t help overhearing,” Nancy said. “But we won’t say a word.”

“Ms. Leggio, Mr. Peters, these are my friends, Nancy and Bess,” Deirdre said. “You can trust them. They won’t say anything to anybody.”

“I’m sure they won’t.” Mr. Peters smiled at Nancy and Bess, then turned back to Deirdre. “I understand you’re up against several talented opponents in this year’s competitions, Deirdre. I would suggest that you concentrate on your practicing. There are no guarantees for anyone.”

“*I have* been practicing,” Deirdre said coldly. “And I expect to win—on my own.”

“Of course you do,” Mr. Peters replied, turning his back to Deirdre. “Ms. Leggio, I will relay your concerns to Mr. Wells. If he can’t speak with you directly, you and I can discuss matters at the reception tonight. Good day.”

“Thank you,” Ms. Leggio said as Karlan Peters walked away. She turned to Deirdre.

“I see the situation between you two hasn’t changed,” she said.

“I guess not,” Deirdre said with a sigh.

“Well,” Ms. Leggio said pleasantly, “don’t let it bother you. I’m certain Mr. Wells knows you’re an honest girl, and a talented one.”

“I hope so,” Deirdre said softly.

Ms. Leggio talked with the girls for a few more moments, then called the tour back together. She led them to the garden and the other buildings at the conservatory. Just before noon, the tour ended inside the front doors of the main building.

“So what’s the problem between you and Mr. Peters?” Bess asked as they headed toward Deirdre’s locker.

Deirdre shrugged. “He’s Raymond Wells’s private secretary. Because Mr. Wells is one of the wealthiest men in the world, Mr. Peters thinks everybody who comes near his boss is after money, I guess.”

“That’s what he thinks about *you*?” said Nancy.

“He thinks I want Mr. Wells to send me to some expensive school or something,” Deirdre said, keeping her voice low so that the other students in the hall wouldn’t hear.

“That’s ridiculous!” Bess exclaimed. “You’ve worked very hard to get where you are.”

“I have,” Deirdre agreed. “But lately it seems everybody is pushing me to work even harder.”

“Speaking of pushy,” Nancy said, “there’s Professor Jorgenson standing by the lockers.”

Deirdre stopped in her tracks. “That’s all I need,” she said with a sigh.

“Don’t worry,” Bess said. “He just turned and walked off the other way.”

“Maybe I’m just edgy because of the competition,” Deirdre said as she reached her locker. “I hope Mr. Wells will come.”

“Doesn’t he usually?” Bess asked.

“He never makes his plans known,” Deirdre replied with a shrug. “He says that prevents the press from trailing him.” Deirdre began turning her combination lock. “I hope he knows I want to win honestly.”

“I’m sure he does,” Nancy said. “Don’t worry about that or anything else. You’re talented, and you’re a terrific person.”

“That’s right,” Bess agreed. “And we’re here to make sure you don’t forget it.” She grinned. “Now let’s go meet your parents and have some fun.”

“You’ve got it,” Deirdre said cheerfully. She opened her locker and reached inside. “The restaurant we’re going to has some of the greatest—” Deirdre suddenly froze again. “Oh, no,” she whispered. A look of hurt and anger appeared on her face as she pulled out her jacket.

Nancy was shocked. It looked as if someone had cut the jacket to pieces with a razor. The shiny fabric had been shredded right down the back.

“There’s a note,” Nancy said, pulling a piece of paper from the jacket pocket.

The note was made up of raised, bumpy letters clipped from business and greeting cards. It was a short note, but the message was all too clear.

“Drop out of the competition,” Nancy read aloud. “Or else!”

A Stranger in the Crowd

A small group of students gathered around Nancy, Bess, and Deirdre. Low murmurs could be heard as everyone expressed outrage at Deirdre's slashed jacket.

"It must have happened during the last period," said one boy.

"Did anyone see some person going through Deirdre's locker?" Nancy asked the crowd. She received a mumbled chorus of nos in reply.

"It could have happened anytime after I arrived this morning," Deirdre said angrily. She threw her ruined jacket on the floor. "I haven't been near my locker since then."

Nancy picked up the jacket and examined it closely. She checked the tears as well as the pockets for further clues but didn't find any.

"That was a really cruel thing to do," another student said. He shook his long brown hair and picked up his instrument case. "If there's anything I can do, Deirdre, just ask."

"Thanks, Scott," Deirdre said.

"Good luck in the competitions," he said.

Deirdre gave him a big smile. "You, too."

Several more students spoke to her as the crowd broke up. Deirdre talked to them briefly, then began pulling her things together.

"I'm glad to see not all of the students here are like Brie," Bess said. "Who's that boy with the long hair?"

"That's Scott Frazier. He's a really nice guy," Deirdre replied. "He's a good flutist, too."

Nancy held up the padlock. "Whoever did this had to know the combination to your lock," she said. "It wasn't broken or

cut.”

“It could be anybody,” Deirdre replied. “Anyone could have seen me opening the lock. I certainly wouldn’t have noticed them watching.”

“Well, Brie gets my vote.” Bess looked up and down the hallway. “It’s just the kind of trick a girl like her might pull.”

“We don’t know that,” Nancy said. “Besides, someone else was near these lockers. The same person who was in the auditorium yesterday.”

“Professor Jorgenson!” Bess gasped. “That’s right. Do you think . . . ?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Nancy said. “But I promise I’ll find out what’s going on.” She placed the jacket back in the locker and closed the door. “I’d like to examine that more closely later. Right now,” she said, locking arms with Deirdre, “we have a lunch date with your parents.”

Deirdre’s spirits seemed to perk up a bit. “That’s right. My folks were looking forward to seeing you two. I guess we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

The girls caught a local bus into Seattle’s harbor district. A half hour later, they were walking into one of the city’s main tourist attractions, Pike Place Market.

The market was large and colorful. It was several blocks long and contained long rows of flower shops, artists’ stalls, restaurants, and stands selling seafood and produce.

Entering through the main arcade, the girls found the Thompsons at a restaurant called Kelly’s.

“This place is great,” said Mr. Thompson after they’d ordered their meals.

Nancy glanced around the restaurant. Every table was taken, and a line was forming at the door. She noticed one customer offering to take a seat at the counter just to get in sooner. He was a balding, heavyset man in a shabby gray suit. He glanced toward Nancy’s table, then sat down and turned his back to her.

“The view of Elliott Bay is my personal favorite,” Nancy heard Mrs. Thompson say. “This was one of the first places we

came to when we moved out here.”

“That must have been really difficult,” Bess said. “Packing up everything and moving to a totally new city.”

“Well, it’s what we had to do,” said Mr. Thompson. His voice was gruff but friendly. “We needed a city with a good school for the blind and an excellent music academy. Seattle had both.”

Mrs. Thompson looked thoughtful as she gazed out the window. “It wasn’t easy at first.”

“Especially when they didn’t even know if I’d make it into the conservatory,” Deirdre added.

“But you did,” Nancy said.

“That’s right,” Mr. Thompson said proudly. “Then our daughter got herself a part-time job with an answering service and received a small scholarship. Now she’s Sabatini’s best!”

“Stop, Dad,” Deirdre scolded, looking a little embarrassed.

“It’s true, Didi,” Deirdre’s mother said. “You impressed all the people at that school—even that snooty Professor Jorgenson.”

Nancy hesitated. She hadn’t planned to discuss Deirdre’s problems in front of her parents, but she did want to learn something about the professor.

“What exactly happened between you and Professor Jorgenson?” Nancy asked Deirdre.

Deirdre sighed. “Well, most of the teachers at the conservatory are tough. But Professor Jorgenson went too far.”

“How?” Bess asked.

“He was always very critical,” Deirdre explained. “As if he wanted to hurt my feelings. A lot of kids had trouble with him, but after a year I had to go to the headmistress.”

“You mean Ms. Leggio?” Nancy asked.

“That’s right,” Mr. Thompson interrupted. “After the things that guy said, I insisted that—”

“Dad.” Deirdre poked her father in the side. She didn’t like her father sticking up for her.

“What did he say?” Nancy asked.

“Mean stuff,” Deirdre said reluctantly. “That I wasn’t really trying, and I wasn’t committed enough. He even told me that

with my technique I'd never succeed." Deirdre paused as the waiter arrived with their food.

"Go on," Nancy urged after the waiter had left.

"I told Ms. Leggio, and she gave me another teacher," Deirdre said. "Some of Professor Jorgenson's other students heard about that and tried to do the same."

"I bet that didn't make him happy," Bess said.

"It sure didn't. He blew up and called us all quitters—especially me. Now Professor Jorgenson and I try to stay out of each other's way. That's why I was surprised when you said he was in the auditorium yesterday."

"When did all of this happen?" Nancy asked.

"About a month ago," Deirdre replied. "I couldn't have him making me nervous right before the competition."

"Deirdre will be competing against a number of fine young musicians," Mrs. Thompson said. "We believe she's the best, but she'll need all of her skills to win."

"She'll do it," Deirdre's father said firmly. "She'll tear into her music the way I'm going to tear into this smoked salmon."

"And after we finish eating," Mrs. Thompson said cheerfully, "Rudy and I will take you on a tour around the area."

"That'd be great," Bess said.

"Terrific," Nancy said. She grinned and admired the seafood salad in front of her. "I think I'm going to like it here."

As they ate lunch, Nancy was glad to see Deirdre enjoying herself. For a little while, at least, her friend seemed to have put aside her worries and concerns.

Later the Thompsons took the girls on a stroll along the Seattle waterfront. It was a thoroughfare of great activity—a collage of novelty shops, amusement arcades, and seafood restaurants. Street musicians played, mimes performed, and brightly colored flags flew from almost every ship and building.

"I'd love to go on one of those," Bess said as she read Deirdre a sign advertising moonlight cruises on the bay.

"Then we will," Deirdre said. "My folks and I have done it a few times."

“We’ll set it up,” Mrs. Thompson offered. “Maybe tomorrow or the day after.”

“Thank you,” Nancy said. “I’m sure a cruise would be a lot of fun.”

A few minutes later, as Bess and the Thompsons walked ahead, Nancy and Deirdre stopped to admire a hand-carved totem. The artist placed it in Deirdre’s hands and allowed her to feel it.

Just then, out of the corner of her eye, Nancy spotted a familiar heavysset man in a shabby suit watching them. But when she turned around, he’d melted into the crowd.

Where did he go? Nancy wondered. She carefully scanned the crowd, but the man was nowhere in sight.

“Is something wrong?” Nancy heard Deirdre asking her. “You just bumped into me.”

“No,” Nancy lied, not wanting to upset her friend. “I was just trying to take all of this in.”

“Well, don’t worry about that,” Deirdre said cheerfully. “We’ll come down here again before you leave.” She checked her watch. “Oh, I’ve got to get back to school. I have a class in half an hour.”

“Bess and I will go with you,” Nancy offered.

“Okay,” Deirdre said. “Let’s say goodbye to my folks, and then we’ve got to hurry. I hope we can find a cab.”

• • •

“You were lucky—I just dropped someone at the ferry.” Tommy Blue brought his cab to a slow and easy stop in front of the conservatory.

“I guess we were,” Bess said. She leaned toward Nancy and whispered, “Actually, that ride wasn’t half bad.”

Nancy grinned as she and her friends got out of the cab.

“Here’s some money for the ride,” Deirdre said. She tried to place a few bills into Nancy’s hand, but Nancy wouldn’t accept them.

"All right, we'll work it out later," Deirdre said, placing the bills back in her bag. "I have to practice after school, so I'll see you two back at the apartment."

"Okay," Bess said. She watched Deirdre walk toward the building, then turned to Nancy. "Do you think we should meet her after school? Just in case someone tries anything?"

"It couldn't hurt," Nancy replied, then caught up with Deirdre to tell her where they'd meet.

"Can I drive you two anywhere?" Tommy asked when Nancy returned.

Nancy handed him the fare. "No, thanks. We're going to walk around for a—" Nancy broke off in midsentence and stared past Tommy to a shop across the street.

A man was standing in front of the store, looking in the window. He appeared perfectly natural to Nancy, except for one thing. The store was a hair salon and its window offered little to interest a balding man in a shabby suit. Then Nancy recognized him as the man she had seen earlier.

"Do you see that man standing over there?" she asked Bess.

"The one in the old gray suit?" Bess asked. "Sure. What's so special about him?"

"Nothing," Nancy replied. "But I've seen him before. At the restaurant, and later, by the harbor."

"Maybe it's a coincidence," Bess said with a shrug.

Nancy shook her head. "I don't believe in coincidences," she said firmly. "I wasn't sure about him before, but now I am. We're being followed, Bess. The big question is, why?"

Before Bess could say a word, Nancy started across the street toward the shop.

Almost instantly, without looking in Nancy's direction, the man began moving away from the shop. He's been watching my reflection in the window, Nancy thought. The man walked up the block and turned the corner.

Nancy picked up her pace, determined to speak with him. But by the time she reached the corner, the man had disappeared!

Night Music

The man was nowhere in sight.

Where had he gone? Nancy wondered, looking up and down the street. There were a few people coming out of a movie theater down the block, and several couples sat at an outdoor café.

Nancy noticed three parked cars on the block—two sporty models and an old blue sedan. But none of them was pulling away from the curb, nor was anyone sitting behind the wheels.

Walking up to the theater, Nancy peeked into the lobby but saw nothing. Then she moved on to the café. It appeared that all the customers were sitting outside. The inside was empty except for two waiters. Again there was no sign of the heavysset man.

Nancy's thoughts were racing as she headed back to the school. The way he'd disappeared so quickly made her suspect he was a professional. But was he a professional crook, private detective, or policeman? And what was his interest in her and Bess? Whatever it was, Nancy had the feeling she'd have another chance to find out.

A while later, Nancy was still looking for answers as she and Bess walked through the conservatory garden. An assortment of fragrant flowers and trees filled the cool green area.

Bess dropped onto a small stone bench. "Boy, am I glad to get off my feet." She pulled off one of her sneakers and rubbed her toes vigorously. "We've been on the go all day."

"I thought you started a new exercise program just before we left River Heights," Nancy said.

"I did," Bess replied wearily. "Actually, I only started *reading* about the program. But I'll really get into it when we get back."

Nancy chuckled. Bess had been going on and off different diets and exercise programs for as long as she could remember.

“Speaking of exercise,” Bess said, “do you think this fat man is responsible for the attacks on Deirdre?”

“Maybe,” Nancy said. “Except that adds a new suspect.”

“Not another one,” Bess moaned. “This case is already confusing enough.”

“But I really don’t see how the police or a private detective would tie into the competition,” Nancy continued. “Or how they would connect with the man on the roof.”

“They have to,” Bess insisted. “There’s no other reason for anyone to go after Deirdre.”

Nancy frowned. “Let’s think about who’s involved in Deirdre’s life,” she said. “There’s Professor Jorgenson—”

“And don’t forget that royal pain, Brie Hollister,” Bess added.

Nancy nodded. “Brie really seems to dislike Deirdre, all right.”

“Jealousy,” Bess said.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Nancy muttered softly. “Then there’s Raymond Wells—”

“Wealthy recluse,” Bess said in a dramatic voice. “And his faithful sidekick, Karlan Peters.”

Nancy gave Bess a playful punch and said, “I’m trying to think.” She paused. “Peters thinks Deirdre is after his boss’s money and influence.”

“You’d think Mr. Wells would straighten Karlan Peters out about that.”

“He might not have noticed the tension between Deirdre and Peters,” Nancy said. “And then there’s the man who followed us today.” She sighed. “What we need is more information about all of these people.”

“Maybe we’ll learn something at the reception tonight,” Bess suggested. “Everyone will be there—contestants, parents, faculty, the works.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Nancy said. “There’s a problem, though. I really didn’t bring anything to wear to a party.”

Bess's eyes gleamed. "Great," she said. "We'll have to go shopping."

For the remainder of the afternoon, Nancy and Bess wandered through the stores along the main street. Nancy finally bought a black velvet skirt, and Bess tried on almost every pair of shoes she could find.

"I guess you had better luck than I did," Bess said with a sigh. "Everything I liked was so expensive."

Nancy glanced at her watch. "It's getting late," she said. "We'd better get back to the conservatory to meet up with Deirdre."

A short time later, Bess and Nancy emerged from the school building with Deirdre.

"And then there was this terrific jogging outfit," Bess told Deirdre as they walked down the stone steps. "I almost bought it."

Deirdre grinned. "That's what you said about the other three outfits you described."

"Well, I would have bought them all," Bess said, "if I could afford them."

Nancy glanced toward a flashy limousine parked by the curb. "Speaking of expensive, what faculty member rides around in a limo?"

"No one I know of," Deirdre replied. "What does it look like?"

"Silver gray with a black leather roof and smoked windows," Nancy replied.

"And the driver looks like he could pull the car with his bare hands," Bess added.

"That sounds like Karlan Peters's car," Deirdre said. "The chauffeur must be new, though."

"Peters can afford *that*?" Bess asked.

"It's Mr. Wells's limousine, actually," Deirdre explained. "But he almost never leaves his office."

"Mr. Wells is about fifty years old with light brown hair that's gray at the temples, right?" Bess asked.

"Yes," Deirdre replied. "How did you know that?"

“Because he’s just getting out of the limo,” Nancy said.

Raymond Wells looked like a man of great wealth, Nancy thought. His clothes were perfectly tailored, and his hair was neatly cut and styled.

He strode toward the school as if he were in a big hurry. And right behind him walked Karlan Peters.

“Good afternoon, Deirdre,” Mr. Wells said as he approached the girls. “I hope your practicing is going well.”

“Yes, it is,” she said enthusiastically. “I’m sure I’ll be ready for the—”

“Good,” Mr. Wells said as he continued past her. “I wish you luck.” Karlan Peters followed his boss into the conservatory.

Nancy watched as a sad expression appeared on Deirdre’s face.

“That was pretty rude,” Bess said.

“Maybe Mr. Wells isn’t feeling well,” Deirdre said quietly. “He still sounds like he has a cold.” She started walking down the sidewalk.

“Ms. Leggio did say she needed to talk to him,” Nancy said. “He might be in a hurry to see her about the competition.”

“And he did wish you luck,” Bess added.

Deirdre sighed. “Let’s go back to my place,” she said.

On the way home, Nancy and Bess tried to take Deirdre’s mind off Raymond Wells and the competition. Nancy talked about her boyfriend, Ned, and Bess continued to describe all the clothes she’d almost bought that day.

By the time they reached Deirdre’s apartment, their friend was feeling a little better.

But Nancy’s thoughts were still on the limousine. She’d recognized it as the same one Tommy’s cab had missed the day they arrived. That meant Karlan Peters might have been at the conservatory that day—the day Deirdre fell into the trapdoor. And he could have been at the school when Deirdre’s jacket was slashed. Was Peters trying to drive Deirdre away from his boss?

It seemed a bit farfetched, but it was something to consider. Nancy decided to pay extra attention to Karlan Peters.

By the time Mr. and Mrs. Thompson picked them up for the reception that evening, the girls were ready for some fun. And so were many of the other students, Nancy realized as they reached the conservatory. The street was packed with cars and people.

"It looks like a graduation ball," Nancy said as they got out of the car. "Everyone is so dressed up."

"Aren't you glad I dragged you shopping?" Bess teased.

"I'll park the car somewhere," Mr. Thompson said, looking around. "You ladies go on in."

"All right, Dad," Deirdre said. "Don't get lost. Come on, ladies, let's dazzle 'em."

The reception was being held in a room in the back of the main building. The spacious room had ornate chandeliers and French doors that opened out onto the garden.

"This stuff is gross" were the first words Nancy heard as they entered the reception room. A pretty, red-haired girl was desperately seeking a place to get rid of a glass of pink punch.

"Jeanna!" Deirdre called out. The girl turned and smiled when she saw the group.

"Hi, Deirdre," she said. "The food's great, the music is so-so, and the punch is—"

"Gross," Deirdre finished with a laugh.

Deirdre introduced Jeanna as one of the school's best cellists. Jeanna, in turn, introduced Nancy and Bess to some other students.

Even though there was a lot of talk about music styles, techniques, and tutors, Nancy and Bess were enjoying themselves. Everyone had come to meet people, and even Ms. Leggio seemed relaxed as she chatted with Karlan Peters.

It wasn't until the girls ran into Brie Hollister that the evening grew suddenly tense. She approached Deirdre, Bess, and Nancy as they stood near the French doors, and they all said hello.

"So, tomorrow's the big day," Deirdre said to Brie, then joked, "Are you ready for some real competition?"

Brie stiffened. "Sure I am," she said smoothly. "But you'll do."

Bess quickly came to her friend's defense. "How dare you say that about Deirdre!"

Brie's eyes blazed with anger, and her face turned a deep shade of red. "You just wait, Deirdre Thompson," she said. "Your time is coming." Then she whirled around and stormed off.

"How long has that girl been acting this way toward you?" Nancy said, shaking her head.

"About a year," Deirdre said, shrugging. "But recently it's been getting worse. One of our teachers said it's because we're both so spirited."

"Have you tried talking to Brie?" Nancy asked.

Deirdre nodded. "Sure. But after a while I just got tired of trying to change her."

"Well, let her stew if she wants to," Bess said. "We've got people to see and food to eat, so let's go."

"You two go on," Nancy said. "I'd like to walk in the garden for a few minutes."

Deirdre and Bess went off to the refreshment table as Nancy stepped through the French doors.

She was just about to sit down on a stone bench when she spotted Professor Jorgenson talking with Ms. Leggio a few feet away. The professor appeared very annoyed about something. Several times he shot a glance through the doors at Deirdre, who was standing by the snack table.

Nancy quickly slipped behind a nearby bush, away from the brightly lit area. She had planned to move closer until she could hear what they were saying. But before she could reach them, the conversation ended.

Ms. Leggio walked back inside, but Professor Jorgenson left through a door in a building on the other side of the garden.

Nancy wondered whether she should follow him. The look he'd given Deirdre had been anything but friendly. And if Professor Jorgenson was the person behind the harassments, he might be on his way to set up another one.

Nancy quickly looked into the reception room, hoping to catch Bess's attention, but her friend was nowhere in sight.

Oh, well, Nancy thought. I'm on my own.

Moving quickly through the door that the professor had used, Nancy found herself standing before a narrow stairwell. Through the dim light she could make out a door to her left. Nancy was about to open it when she heard footsteps coming from the floor above and the sound of another door closing.

Cautiously, Nancy made her way up the stairs. She opened the door and stepped out into a dimly lit corridor. It was quiet at first. Then she heard another door closing somewhere down the hall.

Nancy moved slowly. She listened at two or three doors before she reached one marked Headmistress and beneath it, Ms. Leggio's name.

As she put her ear to the door, Nancy heard movements, as if someone were bumping into something in the dark. Whoever was inside didn't belong there, thought Nancy, or else he would have turned on the lights.

Nancy reached out to open the door. But before she could turn the knob her wrist was seized from behind. A stranger's hand twisted Nancy's arm behind her back. Then another hand clamped over her mouth like a vise.

Nancy was helpless. She was a prisoner in a darkened wing of the school—and no one even knew she was there.

6

The Wrong Chord

The hand across Nancy's mouth was smooth yet strong. She could feel part of a ring digging into her lower lip.

She struggled to loosen the hold on her mouth, hoping to scream for help. But the attacker twisted her arm up tighter and yanked Nancy backward.

Then she was pushed into a pitch-black space. Nancy slammed into a wall, and pain shot through her shoulder like a hundred hot needles.

As a door slammed behind her and a key turned in the lock, something cold and slimy dropped onto the back of her neck. Nancy knocked it away instantly and shuddered as visions of some horrid creature flashed through her mind.

She stretched out her arms and inched forward until she found the door. The knob wouldn't turn, so Nancy ran her fingers along the doorjamb until she found the light switch.

A dirty yellow glow revealed that she was in a janitor's closet. Cleaning supplies filled one shelf. Nancy saw with relief that the wet, cold creature in the dark had been only a soggy mop.

Trying the door handle again, Nancy remembered that it was locked. Whoever threw her in the closet obviously wanted her to stay for a while. What a great time to be without my lock-picking kit, Nancy thought.

Her only hope of escape was to bang on the door and hope someone heard her. But what would she tell whoever found her? She had no right to be in this part of the school. She could hardly say that she had been following one of the faculty.

And where was Professor Jorgenson? Had he been the person she'd heard in Ms. Leggio's office? Or was he the one who had

locked her in the closet?

The answers would have to wait. First she had to escape. Nancy began shouting and banging on the door.

Her hands were sore by the time she heard the welcome sound of a key in the lock.

When the door swung open, Nancy found herself facing a barrel-chested man wearing a blue shirt. The patch on his arm identified him as security, but as she looked up at the man's thick neck and scowling expression, Nancy felt anything but safe.

"I suppose there is a very good reason why you are in this closet," came Ms. Leggio's voice. The headmistress was standing just behind the guard.

"I was locked in here," Nancy replied, stepping out.

Ms. Leggio raised an eyebrow. "Was this someone's idea of a joke?"

"No." Nancy hesitated. She still didn't want to mention her real reason for being there. "I heard a funny noise coming from this hallway, so I decided to take a look. Then someone grabbed me and threw me in the closet."

"And you don't know who that person was?" said the guard.

"No." Nancy looked up and down the dimly lit hallway. "How did you find me?"

"Someone heard your cries for help," Ms. Leggio replied. "They came and got me, and I went to get Sam." She nodded toward the guard.

"Hey, what's going on?" came a voice from down the hall.

Nancy turned to see a boy with shaggy brown hair walking toward them. It took her a moment to recognize him as Scott Frazier, one of the students who had spoken to Deirdre when her torn jacket was found.

But Scott wasn't alone. Beside him was Brie Hollister. Nancy thought she didn't look any friendlier than she had earlier.

"It appears that someone decided to play a practical joke on this young lady," Ms. Leggio told Scott.

Nancy shook her head. "I don't think it was a joke."

“Why not?” the headmistress asked, frowning.

Nancy shrugged. “Well, for one thing, whoever jumped me wasn’t alone. I was listening to someone inside your office, and then someone else grabbed me from behind. He wasn’t very gentle, either.”

Ms. Leggio stiffened and her eyes narrowed. She immediately stepped over to her office and tried the door. It swung open easily.

The security guard stepped in front of her and cautiously entered the room, with Nancy and Ms. Leggio close behind.

When the lights were turned on, Nancy saw a reception area with a desk, a couch, and a few file cabinets. Everything seemed to be in order. Then they entered Ms. Leggio’s private office.

The room was impressive, with its deep burgundy curtains, large desk, and high-backed leather chair. Again, the room appeared to be in order, until Nancy looked behind the desk. A pile of folders and envelopes had been spilled all over the floor.

Ms. Leggio gasped and knelt down. Desperately she began rifling through the mess of papers. When she finally stood up and looked at the group, Nancy knew something was terribly wrong.

“The final selection envelope for the violin competition is missing,” she told the guard. “I left it on my desk.”

“I knew it!” Brie exclaimed from the doorway. “I knew she’d try something.”

“Would you please ask the judges to come in here immediately?” Ms. Leggio directed the guard. “Also, please ask Mr. Peters to join us.”

As the guard left the room, Ms. Leggio sat down in her chair and folded her hands together. “Do you have anything else to add to your story?” she asked Nancy. Her gaze was penetrating but not accusing.

“No,” Nancy replied. “But I’m curious to know what is missing.”

Brie quickly stepped into the room. “It’s the tiebreaker for the violin competition,” she replied hotly. “As if you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t,” Nancy said evenly. “And I’m still not sure what this missing thing is.”

“It’s the last selection that the violinists will play if there’s a tie.” Scott gently placed a hand on Brie’s shoulder as he spoke to Nancy. “The first two days of the contest are elimination rounds. Then the two finalists play against each other.”

“And if there’s a tie, the last piece we play is selected by the judges,” Brie added. “The best execution of *that* piece determines the winner.”

“The selection is made from among music every student should know by heart,” Ms. Leggio explained.

“Usually one of the more complicated pieces,” Scott said with a grin.

“The name of the piece is not revealed until the final moments of the competition, if the two finalists are tied,” the headmistress went on. “That way, no one has an opportunity to rehearse the composition.”

“Not if they’re honest,” Brie sneered.

Nancy chose to ignore her. “And the name of the piece was kept here in your office?” she asked the headmistress.

“Yes,” Ms. Leggio replied. “In my files.”

“Who knew it was here?” Nancy continued.

Ms. Leggio eyed Nancy curiously before she answered. “I did, of course—as well as the competition officials and my secretary.” She glanced at the papers on the floor. “Now, I’m afraid, someone has put us in a very awkward position.”

“Awkward?” said a voice. “That doesn’t begin to describe this matter.” Karlan Peters entered the room, followed by five other men and women.

“Your security man has just informed us of what has occurred. The reputation of this competition has been tarnished,” Peters said. “And I’m certain Mr. Wells will be extremely upset.”

“Can’t you select another piece of music for the violinists?” Nancy asked.

“Of course we can,” Ms. Leggio said. “But that doesn’t alter the fact that a theft has been committed.”

“And I have a pretty good idea who did it,” Brie muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Do you have any proof?” Ms. Leggio asked, raising her eyebrows.

“No,” Brie said. “But—”

“Then, Ms. Hollister, I suggest that you and Mr. Frazier return to the reception.”

Brie bit her lower lip and glanced around the room. She looked both angry and embarrassed but said nothing. Instead, she turned and left the room, with Scott behind her.

“Now, Ms.—” The headmistress was looking straight at Nancy.

“Drew. Nancy Drew.”

Ms. Leggio nodded. “You seem to be very comfortable questioning people. Are you studying law?”

“In a way,” Nancy replied. She didn’t want to reveal her experience as a detective. “My father is a lawyer. I sometimes do research for him.”

“I see,” Ms. Leggio said. “Well, Ms. Drew, please repeat your story for the judges and Mr. Peters. Then you may rejoin the gathering.”

Nancy spent the next ten minutes retelling how she had stepped out of the party, heard a noise, and followed it to Ms. Leggio’s office. Everyone seemed to be studying her as if they didn’t quite believe her story. But in the end, Nancy was allowed to leave.

Closing the door as she left the room, Nancy made a quick examination of the lock. She found several scratches around it. Were they made by a key? Nancy wondered. Or had someone used a lock pick to break into the office?

Making her way back downstairs to the reception, Nancy’s mind was filled with questions. There was another piece of the puzzle to fit in place—the theft of the final selection piece. Nancy knew Brie suspected her of stealing the envelope for

Deirdre. But what if Brie had committed the crime—possibly with Scott’s help? And why had the thief removed the envelope from Ms. Leggio’s office? He or she could simply have opened it, read the title of the selection piece, and left without anyone knowing.

Although Scott appeared to be a nice guy, it was possible that he had pushed Nancy into the closet while Brie was in Ms. Leggio’s office. Would he do that for Brie?

Could winning the competition be that important to either of them?

By the time Nancy reached the lounge she felt totally confused, tired, and thirsty.

She crossed the room to the refreshment table and filled a glass with punch. Just as she was about to take a sip, Bess appeared at her side, looking very upset.

“Nancy, we’ve got to do something,” she said urgently. “Brie is telling everybody here about the missing competition piece. And she says Deirdre is the thief!”

Death in D Minor

“How could anyone think that Deirdre would cheat, let alone steal?” Bess exclaimed indignantly.

“It’s hard to believe,” Nancy said. “It appears that somebody has set Deirdre up.”

“Why?”

Nancy knitted her brow. “Maybe to make Deirdre look bad, so she’d be cut from the competition.”

“Or to make her withdraw,” Bess added. “The note in Deirdre’s jacket told her to drop out, remember?”

“That’s possible,” Nancy said. “But we can’t let either of those things happen.” Nancy scanned the crowd until she spotted Deirdre with her parents. “Maybe we should get the Thompsons out of here before any of this gossip reaches them.”

“Good thinking,” Bess said. “I hope it hasn’t already.”

Nancy was relieved to find out that Deirdre and her parents hadn’t heard about the theft yet. They told Nancy they were ready to leave when she suggested it.

“I could use the rest,” Deirdre said. “Violinists are up first tomorrow. I have to be here at ten o’clock sharp.”

Mr. Thompson glanced around the room, seeing that everyone was deep in conversation. “I wanted to say goodbye to Ms. Leggio before we left, but I guess she’s not around.”

“We can talk to her tomorrow at the competition,” Mrs. Thompson said.

“Okay, ladies,” said Mr. Thompson, “let’s go.”

As they headed toward the door, several people said goodbye and wished Deirdre luck. But Nancy couldn’t miss the cold glare Brie Hollister gave Deirdre.

The thin blonde was whispering to Scott Frazier and a few other students standing with them. The eyes of the entire group fell on Deirdre as she walked by.

Brie's determined to make trouble, Nancy thought. And what about Professor Jorgenson? Nancy wondered as she walked outside. The chilly night air sent a slight shiver through her body. The professor had never reappeared at the reception. Surely news of the stolen music should have brought him back—unless he'd committed the theft himself. But if so, why? To get even with Deirdre, or to help someone else win?

Nancy knew she had to find the answers soon. Deirdre's reputation was at stake, and her friend could be in danger.

• • •

"Good morning," Ms. Leggio announced into the microphone. "Welcome to the Sabatini Conservatory of Music's Twenty-fifth Annual Competition of Excellence."

A round of applause greeted the headmistress as she looked out over the crowded auditorium. Behind her, a concert grand piano, a music stand, and a chair stood on the stage. The lights were dim, and a single spotlight shone on her.

When the applause had died down, Ms. Leggio said, "For those of you who don't know the history of this event, allow me to take a few minutes to explain."

"I had no idea this competition would draw such a crowd," Bess whispered to Nancy as the headmistress continued to address the audience. "The auditorium is packed." She settled back in her seat. "Do you think Deirdre is nervous?"

"She sure was earlier this morning," Nancy replied. "She changed her outfit five times."

Nancy and Bess waved to Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, who were sitting a few seats in front of them.

Then Bess spotted Deirdre in the first row with the other competitors. "There she is!" Bess told Nancy excitedly.

"Good luck, Deirdre," Nancy whispered, knowing she was too far away for Deirdre to hear her. "We're rooting for you."

After her speech, Ms. Leggio and the judges took their seats in chairs placed directly in front of the stage.

The four competitors for the category of best violinist rose and went backstage.

Nancy bit her lip. "Here we go."

The lights dimmed. Moments later, the first contestant walked onto center stage and began to play.

Though Nancy and Bess were impressed with the first two violinists, they felt certain that Deirdre was better.

Then Brie Hollister stepped forward.

"I'm anxious to see just how talented she is," Nancy told Bess.

"Not very, I'll bet," Bess replied.

Nancy appreciated Bess's loyalty to Deirdre, but she knew better. Brie had to be talented or else she wouldn't have been selected as one of the competitors.

Sure enough, Brie's playing was excellent. She performed a fast, joyful piece of music that required complicated fingering.

Nancy was very impressed. And by the end of Brie's performance, Bess had changed her mind, too. "I hate to admit it," she whispered as the audience applauded, "but Brie is good. She really could give Deirdre a run for the gold."

Brie walked off, and Deirdre took her place on stage. Nancy noticed her hands seemed to be tightly gripping her instrument. Something about the tentative way she raised her violin made Nancy feel uneasy. "She looks nervous," Nancy said.

"Oh, she'll be fine," Bess said.

But from the first stroke of the bow, Nancy knew Deirdre wasn't up to her usual form. Though she played extremely well, she didn't have the same fire and energy that Nancy and Bess had heard the day they arrived.

But the applause was strong. After the judges had conferred, they made their announcement.

"The three finalists in the category of best violinist are Ms. Brie Hollister, Mr. John Sanchez, and Ms. Deirdre Thompson."

"Come on," Nancy said as the applause rose once again. "Let's go congratulate Deirdre before the next category begins."

Nancy and Bess found the backstage a whirl of activity. The cellists were warming up as the violinists talked with teachers and friends.

Nancy spotted Deirdre standing with a slim, middle-aged woman with short black hair. Though she had just placed in the first round of the competition, Deirdre looked anything but happy.

"Why should I be calm?" Nancy heard Deirdre say as they approached. "First I hear some nasty gossip about me and the theft in Ms. Leggio's office. Then I barely make it through the first round."

"Deirdre," said the woman, "no one puts any stock in that rumor."

"Then why is everyone avoiding me, Ms. Hill?"

"Deirdre," Ms. Hill replied gently, "I assure you, none of your friends, nor any of your teachers, myself included, believe you did anything wrong. Now, please, concentrate on your art."

Deirdre didn't answer.

"Promise me," the woman pressed.

Reluctantly, Deirdre nodded.

Bess said as she and Nancy approached, "We believe in you."

"Thanks," Deirdre said softly.

Ms. Hill nodded to the girls and put her hand on Deirdre's shoulder. "Deirdre, I have to go," she said. "But please remember what I said earlier. Your talent is *all* that matters."

"I'll remember," Deirdre replied, but she didn't sound very convincing.

"When did you hear the rumor?" Nancy asked Deirdre after the teacher had walked away.

"This morning, when I arrived." Deirdre was obviously trying to calm herself as she spoke. "Everyone was talking about the stolen envelope. Then I heard that some people think I took it—or, at least, that I got someone to take it for me."

"Well, the important thing is, you did place," Nancy said, trying to reassure her. "And I'm sure everybody knows you had nothing to do with that theft."

“What about Mr. Wells?” Deirdre said.

“What do you mean?” Bess asked.

“Well, I tried to call him this morning, to see if he was coming here. He wouldn’t even take my call. Karlan Peters said he was busy.” She sighed. “That’s not like Mr. Wells,” she said. “I mean, I know Karlan doesn’t trust me. But now, with this theft rumor, I’m afraid he may have turned Mr. Wells against me.”

“Mr. Wells is a successful businessman,” Bess said. “I’m sure he can make up his own mind about things.”

“If he has all the facts.” Deirdre suddenly began moving toward the doorway. “And I’m going to make certain he does.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

“I’m going downtown to his office to talk to him myself,” Deirdre said.

“Is that a good idea?” Bess asked. “If he’s busy, he might —”

“I’ve been there quite a few times before,” Deirdre replied stubbornly. “I haven’t gone recently because of the competitions. But I’m going now.”

“All right,” Nancy said. “We’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to,” Deirdre told her.

Bess locked arms with Deirdre. “Sure we do. Otherwise,” she added with a wink at Nancy, “we’d miss the chance to meet one of the richest men in the world.”

• • •

A half hour later, Deirdre’s parents dropped the girls off at Raymond Wells’s office.

The building was a tall, modern structure standing in the center of the city skyline. Once the girls were inside, a security guard recognized Deirdre and led them to Mr. Wells’s private elevator. It rose with a swift, silent motion. Nancy’s stomach tightened as they headed to the thirty-fifth floor.

Deirdre led Nancy and Bess along a carpeted corridor to an opulent reception area. The woman behind the desk studied them through her gold-rimmed glasses.

“We’re here to see Mr. Wells,” Bess said.

“Do you have an appointment?” the secretary asked.

Nancy was about to explain, when Deirdre said in a surprised voice, “You’re not Charlotte.”

“Miss Andrews is no longer with us,” the woman said. “I’m Mrs. Thornton.”

“Charlotte’s gone?” Deirdre said, frowning. “But she’s been with Mr. Wells for years.”

“Yes,” said the secretary. “It was rather sudden. May I help you?”

“Well, I’m Deirdre Thompson, and—”

“Oh, that’s right—you’re the musician,” said Mrs. Thornton, sounding a little friendlier. “Miss Andrews told me all about you.”

“She did?” Deirdre still looked confused. “What happened to Charlotte?”

Mrs. Thornton sighed and pressed a button on the intercom. “Perhaps Mr. Wells will explain.”

A deep voice responded to the buzzer.

“Ms. Thompson is here to see you, Mr. Wells,” the secretary announced.

A long pause was the only response. The intercom seemed to click off, then back on. “Tell Ms. Thompson that this is not a good time to visit,” came the cold reply. “And in the future I would suggest that she call first.”

Everyone seemed stunned by the abrupt dismissal. Nancy glanced from Deirdre to Bess.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Thornton said. “Mr. Wells has been extremely busy recently. An important transaction is under way, and the preparations have taken up a great deal of his time.”

Nancy suspected that the secretary was referring to the purchase of the Stradivarius violin, but she knew not to mention it. “Could you suggest when he might see us?” she asked.

“Perhaps in a few days,” Mrs. Thornton replied. “I’m sure things will be calmer then.”

The girls said goodbye to the secretary and headed down the corridor in silence.

But as they passed an open door, the sound of an argument caught Nancy's attention.

Glancing through the doorway, Nancy was surprised to see Karlan Peters having a tense conversation with the balding man in the shabby suit.

Before Nancy could catch what they were discussing, the man spotted her. The shocked expression on his face was quickly replaced by a look of anger. Then he stepped over and slammed the door shut.

"What was that all about?" Bess asked. She and Deirdre had stopped ahead of Nancy down the hall.

"I'm not sure yet," Nancy said, catching up to them. "I'll let you know when I've figured it out."

After stopping in the women's room, the girls boarded the elevator and pressed the lobby button. Once the doors had closed, Deirdre turned to Nancy. "What's going on, Nancy?" she asked.

Nancy shook her head slowly. "As I said, I'm not really sure."

"But you have some suspicions," Deirdre insisted. She sounded as if she were on the verge of tears. "Tell me, please. Why is everything going wrong?"

Suddenly the elevator jolted several times and came to an abrupt halt. The girls were thrown against the walls.

Next the lights went out and a strange silence fell over the car.

"What's happening?" Bess's voice cracked with fear.

"We're stuck," Nancy replied, trying to stay calm. "But I'm sure—"

Before Nancy could finish, the elevator was rocked by a series of violent convulsions. Seconds later, the girls screamed as the car began to drop rapidly to the lobby thirty floors below!

Sinister Solo

A sickening wave of fear gripped Nancy as she desperately struck out in the dark, trying to find the elevator's emergency button.

Another jolt threw the three girls to the floor. The elevator remained still for a moment, vibrated several times, and finally stopped again.

Huddled together in the dark, Nancy, Bess, and Deirdre waited for something to happen.

"Do you think it has really stopped this time?" Deirdre asked hoarsely.

"I don't know," Nancy said. "But we'd better try to ring that emergency button while we can."

Nancy could feel her body trembling as she reached up to the panel. The elevator was deathly silent as she felt about the buttons, trying to find the right one.

"I can't seem to locate it," Nancy said, frowning.

"Wait a minute," Deirdre said. Slowly she, too, moved next to the panel.

"There are Braille letters alongside each button," Deirdre said. She ran her hands across the smooth metallic surface, searching for the raised bumps, then said, "Here it is."

Instantly, the alarm began to ring.

"Thank goodness!" Bess exclaimed over the blaring noise. Almost immediately, a man's voice came over the elevator's intercom.

"We'll have you down in a minute," he said. "Just try to stay calm."

"Easy for you to say," Bess muttered.

“Why did this have to happen to us?” Deirdre wailed.

As the three girls tried to relax, Nancy wondered the same thing. She hoped this was nothing more than an accident, but somehow she doubted that.

A crowd was gathered as Nancy, Bess, and Deirdre stepped from the elevator.

“Are you all right?” the security guard asked anxiously.

“We’re fine, Ben,” Deirdre answered.

Bess brushed a lock of hair from her face and shuddered. “Speak for yourself.”

“Sorry I couldn’t get you down faster,” he added. “But the controls weren’t responding right.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

“Well, it was funny.” Ben scratched his head as the other people drifted away. “The panel indicated a power loss, so I tried to restore it—”

“But it wouldn’t respond,” Nancy finished.

“That’s right,” Ben said. “I had to get maintenance to override the system control.”

Nancy explained how the car had plummeted and jolted. “Would a power loss cause the elevator to start and stop erratically?”

“That is very strange,” Ben agreed. “It has never happened before.”

“How many control panels are there?” Nancy asked.

“Two.” Ben pointed to the panel next to the elevator. “This one, and the one on the roof by the heliport.”

“Could someone have turned off the elevator and the alarm from there?” Nancy asked.

“Well, yes,” Ben replied. “But I don’t think anyone would do a thing like that. Besides, they’d have to have a key to the board.”

“And who has keys?” Nancy pressed.

“Just security, the maintenance boys, and upstairs,” Ben answered with a shrug.

“Who’s upstairs?” Bess asked.

“Mr. Wells’s people have a key to the panel there,” Ben replied. “That way they can come and go from the heliport at all hours.”

“Thank you,” Nancy said.

“If you don’t mind, Nancy,” Deirdre said, tugging at her sleeve, “I’d like to get out of here.”

“All right,” Nancy said. She slipped her arm through Deirdre’s. “Where do you want to go? Home?”

“Back to school, I think,” Deirdre said as they walked across the lobby. “I need to practice. Also, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone for a while.”

Reluctantly, Nancy and Bess dropped Deirdre off at the conservatory and went to a local café.

“You don’t think that elevator accident was an accident, do you?” Bess asked.

Nancy took a sip of her soda. “No, I don’t.”

“What an experience,” Bess said. “I’ll never be the same again.” She dipped into her ice cream sundae and brought up a big spoonful of whipped cream and chocolate syrup.

“Somehow I doubt that,” Nancy teased. “But I agree with you. It was pretty scary.”

“So what do we do now?”

Nancy tapped her fingers on the table. “We’ve got to learn more about our suspects,” she said. “And that includes Karlan Peters.” Nancy told Bess about seeing the man in the shabby suit with Peters at the office building.

“Maybe,” Bess said thoughtfully, “Peters and this guy are trying to make Deirdre look bad to Mr. Wells.”

“And Brie’s tactics could all be a part of that plan. . . .” Nancy’s voice trailed away.

“What are you thinking?” Bess asked.

“The man on Deirdre’s roof, the trapdoor, and this elevator experience,” Nancy said slowly. “They were all extremely dangerous. That doesn’t fit the picture.”

“So who do you need to spy on now?”

“Well,” Nancy said with a grin, “since we’re near the school, we need to find out all we can about Brie, Professor Jorgenson, and even Scott Frazier.”

“All right,” said Bess, taking another spoonful of ice cream. “But only because it’s for Deirdre.”

Nancy nodded. She knew how much Bess hated anything dangerous. But in all the years they’d been friends, Bess had never run away when she was needed. Nancy admired her for that.

“Let’s split up and see what we can find out in the next two hours,” Nancy suggested. “I want to be back at the school in time to pick up Deirdre.”

“You don’t want to leave her alone, do you?” Bess asked in a worried tone.

“No,” said Nancy. “Not any more than we have to, anyway. Let’s finish eating and get started.”

• • •

Nancy talked to a number of students about Deirdre, Brie, and Professor Jorgenson. She was careful to make her questions sound casual.

At first, all she heard was how popular and talented each girl was. Some students talked about the rivalry between Deirdre and Brie. Nancy found out that many of them felt Professor Jorgenson was too demanding. But it wasn’t until she talked to Deirdre’s teacher that Nancy got her first real lead.

She found Ms. Hill sitting in the garden having lunch and introduced herself as Deirdre’s friend.

“You and Deirdre should have stayed for the rest of the morning’s competitions,” the teacher said. “They were really something.”

“Deirdre was a little upset,” Nancy said.

“She is an exceptionally talented girl,” Ms. Hill said honestly. “She has great possibilities.”

“How long have you been her teacher?” Nancy asked.

“About a year.” Ms. Hill crossed her legs and sighed. “She is quite driven, you know. I’ve seen her practice a piece for hours, just to get one passage right. Other times she will play something from her head, filled with emotion.”

“That’s strange,” Nancy said. “Deirdre told me Professor Jorgenson said just the opposite.”

Ms. Hill looked annoyed. “Professor Jorgenson has his own problems.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

The teacher was silent.

“Please, Ms. Hill,” Nancy said. “Deirdre is pretty upset over a number of things. I’d like to help her if I can.”

“All right,” Ms. Hill said finally. “It’s a very sad story. Professor Jorgenson has a daughter who attended this conservatory. Her name is Elaine, and she is very talented.”

“The professor must be proud of her,” Nancy said.

Ms. Hill ran her fingers through her short black hair. “Well, Professor Jorgenson had great expectations for Elaine. He coached her night and day, right up to the competitions last year. She lost.” Ms. Hill seemed to search for the right words. “It almost seemed as if she didn’t really *want* to win, but I don’t know.”

“What happened to her?” Nancy asked.

“She left the school and took a job. That led to a tremendous argument between Elaine and her father.”

“Because she got a job?”

Ms. Hill smiled. “As a waitress at the Space Needle Restaurant. Elaine admitted to her father that she had never wanted to become a professional musician. Professor Jorgenson didn’t take that very well. He’s tough on other students, too, but it’s my guess that he was looking for another virtuoso in Deirdre.”

“Thank you, Ms. Hill,” Nancy said as she rose from the bench. “Things are a little clearer to me now. How do I get to the Space Needle Restaurant?”

“There’s a monorail that leaves from the mall downtown,” Ms. Hill explained. “It will take you straight out there.”

Nancy thanked the teacher again and turned to go. That’s when she saw Professor Jorgenson standing only a few feet away. She didn’t know if he had overheard her conversation with Ms. Hill, but the expression on his face was sour.

“Good afternoon,” Nancy said as she passed, trying to appear casual.

The professor nodded but said nothing. All the way out of the garden, Nancy could feel his eyes on her back.

She caught a cab in front of the school. As the vehicle pulled away, Nancy looked out the window. Professor Jorgenson was nowhere in sight, but that didn’t make her feel much better.

When she got to the mall a voice crackled from a speaker, “The next monorail is approaching the station. Please stay behind the railing. Thank you.”

Nancy stood on the edge of the platform, just behind a low metal rail. A large crowd of tourists formed a wall behind her. Leaning forward, Nancy looked up the track to see the bullet-shaped monorail train rushing toward the station. She felt the crowd shifting behind her, anxious to board.

Suddenly, Nancy felt a hand slam into the small of her back. The powerful shove sent her tumbling over the low railing and off the platform.

Before Nancy knew what was happening, she was lying on the concrete structure just beside the track.

She raised her head to see a monorail train racing toward her at thirty miles an hour!

Moonlight Sonata

Nancy had no time to jump back up to the platform. The monorail kept coming. She felt the stone structure rumble under the weight of the train. Then she heard the screeching of brakes.

In seconds it would all be over.

Suddenly Nancy glimpsed a means of escape. A concrete support beam right below her slanted down about eight feet to a vertical beam that ran down to the street. Nancy hoped that the top of the vertical beam would stop her fall.

Without a second thought, she rolled off the track and out into space. Nancy fell onto the slanted beam and rolled toward the upright beam. She landed but dangled half off the beam, thirty feet in the air. The vibrations of the monorail nearly shook her loose.

Nancy held on with all her might, and the piercing shriek of the brakes finally ended. The train came to a stop.

Slowly, Nancy pulled herself back onto the top of the support beam. She lay there, trying to catch her breath, her heart beating rapidly as she listened to the murmurs of the people overhead.

That was close, Nancy thought. Much too close.

Ten minutes later, Nancy was pulled up from her perch with the stationmaster's help. She was bruised and dirty but alive. People crowded around her, offering help, while a policewoman with tightly curled blond hair began to question her.

"What happened, miss?" she asked.

Nancy decided not to mention being pushed off the platform. She had no proof that someone had done it deliberately, and the questioning would only delay her investigation. "I'm not sure,"

she said. "I guess I was standing too close to the edge. Then the crowd moved and—"

"Would you like to go to the hospital?" the stationmaster said.

"No, thanks," Nancy replied, giving him a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, really."

After a few more questions the officer and the stationmaster had Nancy sign a report. Then they reluctantly allowed her to go.

Nancy boarded the monorail and tried to relax as it cruised north over Fifth Avenue to the Space Needle. The futuristic structure rose in the distance like a flying saucer on a tall pedestal.

Nancy got off the monorail and found herself in the middle of a small amusement park. There were food concessions, arcade games, rides, souvenir shops, and a carousel. She was tempted to look around for a while, maybe even buy some cotton candy, but she was anxious to speak with Elaine.

Tourists were lined up at the entrance to the Space Needle. An inside corridor led around its circular base to a set of elevators. When her turn came, Nancy rode the five hundred feet straight up to the observation deck and the restaurant.

Stepping from the elevator, Nancy was impressed with the lavish setting and spectacular view of the city.

Nancy asked the maître d' if she could speak to Elaine Jorgenson. He sat Nancy down at a table and went off to find Elaine.

Within a few moments, a young waitress with glasses and frizzy brown hair appeared at her table.

"I'm Elaine Jorgenson," she said. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"I'm Nancy Drew," Nancy told her, extending her hand. "My friend has a problem, and I think you might be able to help."

"Do I know your friend?" Elaine asked.

"I don't think so," Nancy said. "But she knows your father. She's a student at the Sabatini Conservatory, and she's having, well, some difficulties with him."

Elaine said, "I don't know how I could help you."

Nancy reached out and touched the girl's hand. "Please," she said. "My friend is in the competition. You know how stressful that can be. The past few days have been really painful for her, and your father has been"—Nancy searched for the right word—"difficult. I thought maybe you could help us understand why."

Elaine sat down in a chair next to Nancy. "What's your friend's name?"

"Deirdre Thompson."

Elaine nodded. "I've heard she's very talented."

"I was told you were a contestant once, and that your father was your coach," Nancy said.

Elaine rolled her eyes. "Drill sergeant is more like it. My father and I don't speak to each other much these days. You see, he wanted a virtuoso in the family, a winner. But he got a quitter instead."

Nancy frowned. "But Ms. Hill said you had a promising career."

"Maybe," Elaine said softly. "But I don't want to devote my life to music, and my father couldn't accept that."

"I don't understand," Nancy said.

Elaine sighed and leaned back in her chair. "You see, my father was once a violinist. Then he was in an accident and damaged the nerves in his left hand. That's the hand he used to finger the violin strings. His career was over."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Nancy said sincerely. "I didn't know."

"My father didn't take it too well," Elaine said. "From then on, my career was his career. He wanted me to be what he never could be. When I didn't win the competition, he said I hadn't really tried. Maybe I hadn't, I don't know—" Just then Elaine noticed the maître d' pointing to a table of customers.

"I have to go," she said, rising quickly. "Listen, if my father is pushing Deirdre, it's sort of a compliment."

Nancy looked puzzled.

"It means he thinks she's a potential genius. But," Elaine added, "it's for his own gain as well as hers. Tell Deirdre to work for her *own* goals."

Nancy thanked Elaine for her time and left the restaurant.

On her way back to the conservatory, Nancy couldn't help thinking about Professor Jorgenson. Had he wanted Deirdre to be his protégée so badly that he'd kill her chances of winning the prize without him?

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That evening a brisk wind whipped Nancy's reddish blond hair behind her as the yacht moved easily through the blue-black waters of Elliott Bay. All around her passengers strolled along the deck, laughing and talking under the bright full moon. Nancy was enjoying the cruise. Dinner had been delicious, and she, Bess, and the Thompsons had talked about old times in River Heights.

Bess came up beside her and said, "I wanted to tell you what I found out today. We didn't get a chance to talk at the apartment. First, tell me what happened to you. I saw your filthy sweater and all those scratches."

Nancy related the events of her afternoon, from the trouble on the monorail to her talk with Elaine Jorgenson. When she'd finished, Bess looked worried.

"Nancy, this is getting deadly," Bess said. "It doesn't even make sense. No one knows you're a detective, but they're still trying to kill you."

"They *do* know that I'm Deirdre's friend," Nancy replied. "And that I'm asking a lot of questions."

Bess nodded. "That's right. And you did say that Professor Jorgenson might have heard you talking to Ms. Hill."

"It is possible that he's behind all this," Nancy said slowly. "But is he bitter enough to try to kill?"

Bess shivered. "I can't believe he'd do anything to hurt Deirdre."

“Neither can I,” Nancy said. “But right now I can’t come up with another answer.”

“Well, the competition is pretty important to Brie Hollister,” Bess said.

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

Bess brushed a lock of hair from her face. “Brie is claiming there’s a plot to fix the competition so Deirdre will win.”

“Isn’t that what she was saying at the reception?” Nancy asked.

“Yes,” Bess replied. “Only now she says that soon she’ll have proof.”

Nancy sighed. “Deirdre deserves a fair chance to win this contest.”

“She’s lost so much already,” Bess said. “She shouldn’t have to lose this, too.” Bess suddenly paused, and Nancy saw a look of embarrassment cross her face. “Hi, Deirdre,” Bess said softly.

“Hi,” Deirdre walked toward them, moving her cane back and forth. “My folks pointed me in the right direction. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

Nancy guided Deirdre in between her and Bess.

“I’m sorry,” Bess said. “I keep putting my foot in my mouth. I’m just not sure what to say about your being blind now. I feel so stupid.”

“There’s no need for that,” Deirdre said, then she took a deep breath. “Sometime I think of how things used to look. The bright colors of flowers, the deep cool greens of the trees. I remember the reflection of sunlight on water and watching dancers twirl and glide across the floor. But other times everything is sound. I hear rhythms and music, and they form pictures in my mind.”

“You really are something,” Bess told Deirdre.

Deirdre smiled. “Music is a very important part of my life,” she said seriously. “My parents have worked very hard to see that I have a chance to succeed. I won’t let anyone take that from me. Not ever.”

Nancy placed her arm around Deirdre's shoulder. "Bess and I are going to do everything we can to stop all of this trouble."

"I know," Deirdre said. "And I'm going to help. Winning is important to me, but I want to save my reputation, too."

"Then we'll do it together," Nancy said. She and Bess hugged Deirdre. "That's a promise."

• • •

"She's simply grand," someone whispered behind Bess and Nancy as Deirdre began playing. "It's definitely between Ms. Thompson and Ms. Hollister."

Nancy and Bess exchanged smiles. It was the second day of the music competition, and the audience was brimming with excitement.

John Sanchez had played well, but Brie had performed a romantic piece that brought tears to Bess's eyes, despite how she felt about the girl.

Deirdre was performing brilliantly. Sometimes her bow skipped across the strings, and other times it seemed to hug them, drawing out the notes and sending them swirling out to the audience.

When the judges announced that the final round would be between Deirdre and Brie, the audience applause was tremendous. Ms. Leggio reminded everyone that the final round would be played the next day at noon, and the contestants left the stage. Nancy, Bess, and Mr. Thompson hurried backstage to congratulate Deirdre.

"You were wonderful, sweetheart," Mr. Thompson told his daughter, practically lifting Deirdre off her feet as he hugged her.

"Dad!" Despite her protest, Deirdre laughed.

"Well, come on," Mr. Thompson said. "If I'm going to drop you off at your job, Didi, we've got to hurry."

"Are you sure you want to go to work today?" Bess asked. "Couldn't the answering service get along without you?"

Deirdre laughed. "I've got bills to pay. I'll work for a few hours, and then I'll come back here to practice."

The girls made plans to meet at the school later that afternoon, and Deirdre left with her father.

When Nancy and Bess stepped out of the conservatory, the streets and sidewalks were buzzing. There were still three more events before the competition was finished for the day.

As Nancy scanned the crowd, she spotted a familiar person.

"Bess!" she exclaimed, grabbing her friend by the arm. "He's back!" Nancy pointed across the street. There, standing by a tree, was the balding, heavysset man attempting to light a pipe.

Bess looked him over. "He's got on a different suit, but this one's also baggy and rumpled."

"Strange," Nancy said. "He's not watching Deirdre. She's leaving now in her parents' car."

Bess followed the stranger's gaze. "So what is he looking at?"

Nancy wasn't sure. The man appeared to be watching the crowd by the side of the main building. There was a double door that a number of people were using and a driveway that led in back of the school.

Nancy studied the crowd, but she didn't see anyone she thought was connected with the case. Just then a car came down the driveway.

"Mr. Wells's limousine," Nancy told Bess. "Karl Peters must be leaving." She turned in time to see the stranger step back behind the tree. As soon as the limo passed, he walked over to a car parked a few feet away.

"He's getting into that blue sedan," Nancy added. "That same car was parked near here the other day when I saw him. I bet that's how he dodged me. He ducked down in the car."

"It looks like he's following the limo," Bess said.

"I think so, too," Nancy said as she and Bess hurried across the street. "He was with Karl Peters the other day when we went to see Mr. Wells."

"But if he's working with Peters, why does he need to follow him?" Bess asked.

“I don’t have all the answers yet,” Nancy said.

When she and Bess reached the tree, Nancy studied the ground where the stranger had been standing. Then she picked something up and put it in her pocket.

“What’s that?” Bess asked.

“A book of matches from our friend,” Nancy replied. “It’s printed with the name of a restaurant called Stoney’s in Pioneer Square. We can’t be sure he goes there,” she said, “but right now it’s the only clue we have, so let’s check it out.”

The girls caught a bus, and a short time later arrived in the old section of Seattle known as Pioneer Square.

Many of the streets were paved with cobblestones, with wrought-iron street lamps, and the buildings were over a hundred years old.

Nancy and Bess found Stoney’s on a narrow side street. The second waiter they asked recognized their description of the bald man.

“Sure, he’s a regular customer,” the waiter said. “Why are you looking for him?”

Nancy had already prepared a story. “We’re trying to get into a club at our college,” she said brightly, “and we have to get him to make a donation.”

“That’s right,” Bess added. “The other girls said he’s a real challenge.”

The waiter glanced past the girls through the café window. “Well, you’ll find out soon enough,” he said, “’cause here he comes.”

Nancy and Bess watched as the man walked in and ordered a large meatloaf sandwich and coffee to go.

A few minutes later they followed him across the square to another building. Nancy waited until he’d gone up in the elevator before she and Bess entered the lobby.

“We’re in luck,” Nancy said. “He was the only one on the elevator. It stopped on the fifth floor.”

“Not another elevator,” Bess said nervously.

Nancy pushed her friend toward the second car. "You know what they say about getting back on a horse after you've been thrown."

Bess groaned and stepped in.

When the door opened on the fifth floor, the girls found themselves in a short hall with only four offices. Creeping down the hall and listening at each door, they discovered that the first three were vacant.

Nancy was about to listen at the fourth door when it suddenly swung open. There stood their suspect, glaring at them and holding a long, thin knife.

Swan Song

"Folks have been known to lose ears doing what you're doing," the man with the knife told Nancy and Bess.

"I'm looking for someone," Nancy said, trying to sound calm. She had no idea what the bald man would do next. Her eyes shifted from the knife in his hand to his watery gray eyes.

"Yes," Bess said. "We're selling magazines."

"The only thing you two are selling is a pound of bologna," the man snapped. "What do you really want?"

Nancy stepped back in case he tried to grab her. It was then she noticed the sign on his door: Martin Goldman, Private Investigator. I was right, she thought. He's a professional.

"Actually, we're looking for information," Nancy said. "We'd like to talk to you—without that utensil in your hand."

Goldman looked at the knife in surprise. "Oh. I was about to have my lunch. Well, you might as well come in."

Bess gripped Nancy's arm, but Nancy walked straight into the office. Reluctantly, Bess followed.

Goldman's office looked as if he had been working there forever. Old paintings and photos covered the walls, and loose papers were scattered all over the room. His desk was equally messy, covered with folders, newspaper clippings, and a large sandwich.

"Now, who are you and what do you want?" Goldman asked.

Nancy took a deep breath. The smell of meatloaf and pickles was making her a little nauseated. "My name is Nancy Drew. I'm a friend of Deirdre Thompson."

Goldman squinted at Nancy for a moment. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I think I've heard of you."

"I beg your pardon?" Nancy sounded puzzled.

"What's your dad's name?"

"Carson Drew," Nancy replied. "He's a —"

"Pretty hot criminal attorney," Goldman interrupted. "I met him a few years back."

"You know my father?" Nancy asked in surprise.

Goldman nodded. "He gave me some information on a case once." The investigator cut his sandwich in half. "You're some kind of kid detective," he said with a snort.

For the first time since she had entered the office, Bess found her voice. "Nancy happens to be a great detective," she declared. "I'll bet she's solved more cases than —"

"Bess," Nancy said calmly, "we're here because of Deirdre, remember?"

"Your friend?" Goldman asked.

"Yes," Nancy said. "She's been the victim of some very nasty tricks. I want to find out why."

"And you think I would try to harm a blind girl?" Goldman raised his eyebrows.

"I know you've been following her," Nancy said.

"A case I'm working on involves the girl," he said, studying Nancy. "She might be a lead."

Nancy followed her hunch. "This case involves Mr. Raymond Wells and his assistant, Karlan Peters, right?"

Goldman nodded.

"Well, Deirdre's life is in danger, and your case may have something to do with it."

Goldman took a bite of his sandwich. "All right," he said after he finished chewing. "Here's a piece of the puzzle. I used to work for Wells. Special security jobs. I even had my own little office space up there at the top of his castle."

Nancy realized it must have been Goldman's office she had seen him in with Karlan.

"Anyway," Goldman continued, "Wells has got this big deal going. Lots of bucks involved. As always, I was handling

security for the delivery of the, uh, item. But about a week ago everything went sour.”

“You mean the deal fell through?” Bess asked.

“No,” he replied. “But I was suddenly booted out of the office.”

Nancy frowned. “So who *is* handling the security for the Stradivarius?”

Both Bess and Goldman looked at Nancy in amazement.

“How’d you know about that?” Goldman asked suspiciously.

Nancy explained how Deirdre had mentioned the violin the day they had toured the conservatory and met Karlan Peters. “Mr. Peters was very upset that others knew about the violin,” she added.

“I’m not surprised,” Goldman said, nodding. “That fiddle is worth several million dollars.”

“So why have you been following Deirdre?” Nancy asked.

Goldman smiled. “Well, a month ago, Wells bought the Stradivarius. His insurance company insisted on handling the delivery themselves. They’re arranging to bring the violin to Seattle and hand-deliver it to Wells. Wells went along with this.” Goldman took a sip of coffee.

“So what happened?” Bess asked eagerly.

“A couple of weeks ago, Karlan Peters called me into Mr. Wells’s office. He and Mr. Wells asked me what arrangements the insurance company had made. I didn’t know, but I tried to find out. The insurance boys told me to go fly a kite. Said they couldn’t tell me anything.”

“But Mr. Wells had agreed to let the insurance company handle things, right?” Nancy said. “Why did he ask you for this information?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Goldman was becoming agitated. He took a deep breath and fingered a pencil on his desk. “Anyway, I told them I couldn’t get the info. Karlan and the boss accused me of shirking my responsibilities. A few days later, I’m back here in the old closet.”

“Just like that?” Nancy asked.

“Yep,” Goldman replied. “I went back yesterday to pick up a few of my things. Gave that Peters a piece of my mind, too.” Goldman clasped his fingers across his rather large stomach.

“I still don’t see what all of this has to do with Deirdre,” Nancy said.

“Nothing,” Goldman said. “I know that now, anyway. Raymond Wells always treated his people fairly, so I figured someone might be pressuring him to act like that.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow. “You mean blackmailing him?”

“Right on the beam, kid,” Goldman replied. “So I started nosing around and following folks. Your friend was one of them. But she’s a good kid.”

“Who actually asked you to leave?” Nancy asked. “Karlan Peters?”

Goldman wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Nope. They double-teamed me. Wells sat at his desk, with Peters standing next to him, like a lieutenant.”

Nancy frowned. Martin Goldman had given her a lot of information. And now she had more questions. Why would Raymond Wells suddenly fire his secretary and security chief within a week of each other? Did his reasons have to do with the competition or the Stradivarius? She decided to pump Goldman for more information.

“Do you know when the violin is arriving?” Nancy asked.

“I’ve got a hunch,” Goldman replied. “But I’ve told you more than enough already. And that was just because of your dad.” Goldman rose from his desk. “If you find out anything, give a call.”

Nancy’s eyes locked with his. “And you’ll do the same?”

Goldman smiled. “Sure. Why not?” he said.

Nancy left Deirdre’s phone number with Goldman and then shook his hand.

As the investigator said goodbye to Bess, Nancy glanced down at his desk. A small calendar was open to the next day’s page. Something was written there in red ink. But before Nancy could

read the scrawled handwriting, Goldman pushed some papers over the page. “Bye-bye,” he said pleasantly.

Yes, Nancy thought. Bye-bye—for now.

• • •

The hallways of the conservatory were buzzing as Nancy and Bess headed for the rehearsal room to meet Deirdre. She had told them it was near her locker.

A small crowd of students had gathered around the locker area as the girls approached. Nancy and Bess could hear the commanding voice of Ms. Leggio, calling for order.

“What’s going on?” Nancy asked a student at the back of the crowd.

“Brie found the envelope with the stolen finale selection sheet music!” the student told her. “It was in someone’s locker.”

A sickening feeling raced through Nancy as she and Bess pushed through the crowd.

“Oh, no!” Bess gasped when they saw the scene in front of them.

Ms. Leggio was holding a manila envelope, and Brie Hollister was glaring at her.

“You have proof now,” Brie declared. “Deirdre stole the final selection. It was in her locker.” All eyes turned toward Deirdre Thompson, who stood by her open locker, a look of defeat on her face.

“Deirdre.” Ms. Leggio sounded genuinely upset. “I don’t know if this accusation is true. In fact, I find it very difficult to believe. But if you *did* remove this from my office—or asked someone to remove it for you—I’m afraid you can consider yourself not only out of the competition, but expelled from this school.”

Passage to Terror

“What do you mean, *if* it’s true?” Brie shouted. “I found the envelope in her locker! She got someone to steal it for her!”

“That will be quite enough,” Ms. Leggio told Brie, then turned back to Deirdre. “Deirdre,” she said. “Would you please come to my office?”

“Yes,” Deirdre said. “But I didn’t steal the envelope, and I don’t know how it got into my locker.”

“Just a minute,” Nancy called, stepping into the center of the crowd. “Deirdre’s locker was broken into before and someone shredded her jacket. Couldn’t that same person have put this envelope in there?”

“Why didn’t you bring this to my attention earlier?” Ms. Leggio asked.

“Because,” Nancy replied, “we were hoping to get more information before we said anything.”

“I intend to look into this matter very closely,” Ms. Leggio said. “But it doesn’t change the situation at hand.”

“This is ridiculous,” Bess said. “Unless the name of the song is written in Braille, Deirdre couldn’t even read it.”

A murmur went through the crowd.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Brie said, eyeing Nancy and Bess. “She could always have the person who stole it read it to her.”

“Deirdre and I will discuss this in my office,” Ms. Leggio said firmly. “And the committee will make a decision.”

“Don’t worry,” Nancy said, taking Deirdre’s hand. “We’ll beat this thing.”

Deirdre’s expression was grim. “We’ll have to.”

Nancy and Bess watched Deirdre walk down the hall with Ms. Leggio. Though Deirdre held her head high, Nancy knew how upset she felt.

Bess whirled on Brie Hollister. "What is your problem?" she cried angrily. "Why are you so determined to have Deirdre cut from the contest?"

Brie took a step back. "Because she hasn't earned the right to be in it!" Brie spat back. "She makes friends in high places and expects everything to come her way."

Nancy shook her head. "Do you *really* believe she made friends with Mr. Wells so she could win this contest?"

"Yes," Brie replied. "And I'm not the only one who thinks that. She's good, but no way is she going to cheat her way through the competitions."

Nancy slowly closed the door to Deirdre's locker. "Brie, how did you know that the envelope was in Deirdre's locker?"

The girl didn't answer. "There are only two ways," Nancy went on. "One, you put it there, or two, you know who did."

Without looking back, Brie stormed off through the crowd.

As Brie departed, Nancy saw Professor Jorgenson standing to one side of the hall. The thin-faced man seemed to be lost in thought. Then suddenly he headed down the hallway after Brie.

The gathering of students slowly began to break up. Finally only Scott Frazier remained.

He ran his fingers through his long shaggy hair as he turned to Nancy. "No matter what you think of Brie, she wouldn't frame Deirdre," he said. "I know her."

Bess glared at him. "If you believe what Brie just said, then you definitely don't know Deirdre."

Scott looked confused. He glanced from Bess to Nancy, then walked away.

"Come on, Bess," Nancy said. "Let's go to Ms. Leggio's office and wait for Deirdre. I have a feeling she may need us."

• • •

“Spaghetti and meatballs are my specialty,” Bess declared as she looked through the cabinets in Deirdre’s kitchen. “So that’s what we’re having for tonight’s dinner. By the way, where do you keep the plates?”

“Top left cabinet.” Deirdre stood by the window, playing a soft melody on her violin. “You two have been really great,” she said.

“You wouldn’t know that from the tone in your voice,” Nancy teased.

“I’m sorry.” Deirdre joined Nancy at the table. “This whole mess is really driving me crazy. I may be kicked out of the competitions, not to mention the conservatory.”

“No way,” Bess declared. “Now dig in.” She placed a steaming platter of spaghetti and meatballs on the table, along with a basket of warm garlic bread.

Nancy served the salad. “A lot of things have happened in the past few days,” she said. “I’d like to ask you about some of them, if you don’t mind.”

“All right,” Deirdre said. “Shoot.”

Nancy spent the better part of the dinner going over all of the events that had occurred since they arrived. She included her suspicions about the elevator and her brush with disaster at the monorail.

“Nancy, why didn’t you tell me about the monorail?” Deirdre demanded. “You could have been killed, and all because of me.”

“No, Deirdre,” Nancy corrected. “Because of someone who wants to harm you for some reason. And that’s what we have to figure out. Let’s look at our suspects.” She took a sip of her drink before continuing. “Professor Jorgenson’s daughter Elaine didn’t win the competition a few years ago. She wants no more part of the music world, so the professor chose to teach you.”

“But you transferred out of his class,” Bess added.

“Right,” Nancy said. “So did he decide to get even with you by making sure you lost the competition? Or did Brie decide to fix things so you’d lose?”

“Brie Hollister is my choice for lead stinker,” Bess said.

“Well, she couldn’t have rigged the elevator at Mr. Wells’s office,” Nancy said. “And she probably wasn’t on Deirdre’s roof, either.”

“And she couldn’t have pushed you off the platform,” Bess pointed out. “She was on campus then, spreading rumors about Deirdre.”

“So that brings us to Karlan Peters,” Nancy said. “He could have rigged the elevator. He could have been the man on the roof. But what’s his motive?”

“And don’t forget Martin Goldman,” Bess added.

Deirdre shook her head. “This is all so complicated,” she said.

“Deirdre,” Bess said, leaning forward, “let’s forget about suspects for the moment. Won’t you please tell us what happened with Ms. Leggio this afternoon?”

Deirdre sighed. “I’m sorry, guys. I just don’t want to talk about it yet. It’s too painful.”

Just then the phone rang. “I’ll get it,” Nancy said, reaching over and picking up the receiver. “Hello,” she said.

Nancy didn’t recognize the voice on the other end of the line. Then the man said he was Martin Goldman. She listened for a few minutes without saying a word, jotting notes down on a pad. Suddenly she heard a click and then silence.

“That was Martin Goldman,” Nancy said, frowning. “He said he has some important information for me. He wants me to meet him in back of his office building in one hour.”

She got up from the table and grabbed her jacket off the couch. “I’ll have to go. We need all the clues we can get.”

Bess stood up and said, “I’ll go with you.”

“Thanks, Bess, but not this time,” Nancy said. “I want you to stay with Deirdre.”

“Nancy,” Deirdre said, “be careful.”

Nancy patted her friend on the shoulder. “I always am.” And she was gone.

• • •

It took Nancy almost a full hour to find a cab and reach Goldman's building in Pioneer Square. When she finally arrived, the historic district was alive with lights, people, and music. Looking south on First Street, Nancy could see an almost endless row of glowing streetlights. Their soft golden hue gave the area a warm, old-fashioned feeling.

Following Goldman's instructions, Nancy walked down the side street until she came to a wide alley. Then she consulted the piece of paper in her hand and headed down the alley. Goldman said he'd meet her at a door marked *B*.

Why had Goldman wanted to meet here? she wondered. He'd said he'd found an important clue, but why all the secrecy?

Just before she stepped through the doors that led to the stairway beneath Goldman's building, she looked in both directions. One end of the alley seemed deserted, and so did the street beyond.

At the other end, Nancy could just make out the shape of a car's front end. But there were no lights from the vehicle and no movement beyond.

Descending the stairs, Nancy found herself in a damp, dimly lit stone room. There was an old map of the district mounted on the wall. A sign above the map read Welcome to the Seattle Underground Tour: A World of Its Own. A desk beside the map contained a number of brochures and buttons.

Nancy had heard about the Seattle Underground. It was a maze of tunnels running beneath the city's historic district. These had been the original city streets over a hundred years ago, until the city built new sidewalks above. Now they were fascinating ruins for tourists to visit during the day. At night they were usually empty.

Once again Nancy wondered why Martin Goldman had brought her here. Could it be some kind of trick? She decided to look around a little more and then leave.

On the far side of the room a large part of the brick wall had rotted away. Nancy could barely see into the darkened cavity, but she got the impression of debris and wooden stairs.

There was no sign of Martin Goldman. Had he changed his mind? His voice had sounded a bit strange on the phone. And where was the door marked with a *B*?

A noise upstairs interrupted Nancy's thoughts. It was the very distinct sound of someone locking a door and coming down steps.

Nancy moved into the corridor. Her instincts told her that it would be better if she saw whoever was coming first, before he got a look at her.

The corridor was dimly lit. Many of the old bricks and much of the mortar had fallen away. Above Nancy's head were exposed piping and crevices. A musty odor filled her nostrils as she hurried on. Still she heard the sound of the footsteps behind her.

Nancy moved through several doorways and tunnels, always looking back to see if she could spot her pursuer.

Suddenly she felt her foot catch on something, and she went flying forward onto the cold stone floor. She lay there for a moment in silence, listening for the sound of someone coming after her. Then she sat up and brushed off her hands and knees, which had been scraped in her fall. Taking a breath, she turned to see what it was she had tripped on. She gasped when she saw the body of Martin Goldman lying on the ground behind her.

Dark Chords

Nancy placed her fingers against Goldman's wrist. There was a weak but steady pulse. At least he's alive, she thought with relief.

Down the tunnel, Nancy heard approaching footsteps. Suddenly they stopped. Nancy froze. She knew her pursuer was waiting, listening for sounds that would lead him to her.

I can't wait here forever, she told herself. Sooner or later he'll find me. Then Nancy heard a noise behind her. The tunnel went on another few feet, then turned sharply to the right. Nancy couldn't see around the corner, but she knew a second person was coming. She was being stalked from both directions!

Her only chance was to duck through a large opening in the wall, just a few feet away. The room on the other side was almost pitch black. There was no way of knowing if it led to an exit or a dead end. But Nancy had no choice.

She glanced at the injured detective. "I'll try to bring help," she whispered, not knowing if he could hear her or not. Then she leaped up and ran through the opening.

Almost instantly, she heard both pursuers coming after her. Nancy moved as quickly as she could through the chamber, stumbling over broken brick and other debris. Spiderwebs brushed against her face and hair, and the smell of damp earth filled her lungs.

The stalkers were right behind her. She could hear them stumbling in the dark. I've got to find another way out of here, she thought.

Suddenly, Nancy bumped into a wall. She moved along it quickly, running her hands across the surface. "A door," she

muttered almost silently. “There has to be a door.”

A minute later she felt the cold surface of a knob. She turned it, yanked the door open, and raced through the opening. The door slammed shut behind her.

This tunnel was older and narrower. The grayish glow from a few light bulbs along the walls made it look like a dusty cave.

Which way? Nancy wondered frantically.

She looked both ways, then turned right and ran down the tunnel as fast as she could. She ran past the remains of old storefronts, banks, and hotel entrances. It was like running through an underground ghost town.

Back down the tunnel, a door opened and slammed shut. Her pursuers were still coming!

Nancy ducked through a doorway and found herself surrounded by brochures, T-shirts, and postcard racks. She was inside a modern souvenir shop on the underground tour.

Stumbling past the merchandise, Nancy spotted a door with a shiny new knob and hinges. This must be the way out, she thought. Turning the latch, Nancy threw open the door and raced up the stairs, just as she heard voices coming up the tunnel.

Hurry! she urged herself. Hurry!

At the top of the stairs, Nancy found still another door—but this one was locked. She threw back the bolt and pushed the door, but it didn’t move. She continued to push and bang against it as she heard footsteps entering the shop below.

Why won’t it open? Nancy thought, frustrated. Quickly feeling along the doorjamb, she found a second bolt at the top of the door. Nancy pulled it back and raced out into a narrow, moonlit alley, closing the door behind her.

She heard the door open behind her just as she reached the street. But when she looked back, she saw only the door swinging slowly closed. No one was there.

“Are you all right, miss?” someone called.

A few feet away a police officer stood bathed in the light of an old lamppost. “I am now,” Nancy said breathlessly. “But a man’s

been hurt. I think you'd better call for help."

• • •

"He'll live, Miss Drew, but the paramedics say he won't be talking for a while." Detective Roger King opened the door to Martin Goldman's office and waved Nancy inside.

It had been almost an hour since Nancy had escaped the underground tunnels. The police had come quickly. They hadn't found any sign of her pursuers.

Nancy had told the police about the phone call she'd received and that Goldman had worked for Raymond Wells. But Detective King had waited until Goldman was on his way to the hospital before he agreed to check out the investigator's office.

"Are you sure he can't identify his assailants?" Nancy asked.

"Not until he regains consciousness," Detective King said. Casually, he began poking around Goldman's things, lifting books and shuffling papers. "If there's anything in this mess that'll help us," he said, making a sour face, "the boys will have a tough time finding it."

"And you didn't find anything in the underground?" Nancy asked.

"Some footprints and signs of a scuffle." He peered at Nancy, studying her closely.

"You don't suspect *me* of beating him up?" Nancy said, frowning.

"Nah," the detective said. He brushed some lint off his suit. "But we don't have all the facts yet. And you were seen running from the scene of the crime."

"I already told you that a man who said he was Mr. Goldman asked me to meet him," Nancy said.

"And you went running to meet a stranger, alone, in the underground tunnels? Big mistake." The detective shook his head. "Didn't you know that that entire district burned down in 1889? When the city rebuilt it soon afterward, they raised the levels of the street about fifteen feet." He settled into a chair. "The old street levels became basements," he went on. "Not

very-sound thinking on your part.” Suddenly he leaned forward across the large desk. “Do you still think Goldman was attacked by people connected with Raymond Wells?” he asked.

“Yes,” Nancy replied evenly. She was definitely finding it hard to like Detective King.

“It’s also possible that he was working on a totally unrelated case.” Detective King peeked into the wastebasket beside the desk. “Maybe he found out something, and they decided to warn him off.”

“Why did you bring me up here?” Nancy asked.

King lifted the phone and began dialing. “Because it’s also possible that you are telling the truth. Hello, Pat?” he said into the mouthpiece. “Send the lab people up to Martin Goldman’s office.”

Nancy felt certain that the attack on Goldman was somehow connected to Raymond Wells. Both Goldman’s investigations and her own had led back to the millionaire or his people. She had to find out more about Mr. Wells and Karlan Peters. And if Martin Goldman couldn’t talk to her now, there was someone else who could. She hoped a peek at Goldman’s circular address file would give her the address and number for Wells’s former secretary, Charlotte Andrews.

As Detective King continued to talk on the phone, Nancy wandered over to the other side of the desk. It wasn’t difficult for her to flip through the file. While he spoke, Detective King seemed to be admiring himself in the glass desk top. He adjusted his tie and the handkerchief in his breast pocket.

When Nancy found Charlotte Andrews’s name in the file, she memorized the address. She was beginning to edge away when she noticed Goldman’s desk calendar. She remembered how Goldman had covered it when she’d glanced at it the first time she’d been in his office.

Making sure the detective still wasn’t looking, Nancy peeked at the calendar and saw that it was open to the next day’s page. It was smeared with food stains and ink marks. Martin Goldman was not a tidy man.

Through the stains and wrinkles Nancy could just make out the words written in red ink: C. Fiddler—Posies.

Nancy frowned. Was this some kind of code? Why had Goldman tried to hide it from her? And what was so important about tomorrow's date?

Nancy thought of Goldman lying on the cold stone floor.

Obviously, tomorrow was important to Martin Goldman. And if that date was connected with his investigation of Mr. Wells and Karlan Peters, then it had to be connected with Deirdre.

"Is something bothering you?" Detective King's voice pulled Nancy out of her thoughts.

"Not really," she replied. "I just wished I had seen who was chasing me."

King nodded. "Look, they told me on the phone that headquarters checked you out. I guess you have a reputation for playing detective."

Nancy forced herself to remain calm.

"Well, I suggest that this time you stay out of it," Detective King continued. "The police department has the mind and the muscle to handle this case alone."

Nancy decided to act as if she were going along with the detective. "Thank you for your advice, Detective King," she said coolly. "May I go home now?"

"I'll have a squad car drive you," he replied. "And please—no more tunnels."

• • •

Bess and Deirdre were happy to see Nancy come through the door unharmed.

"We've been going crazy ever since you called from Goldman's office," Deirdre said. "Why wouldn't you let us come get you?"

"It was already too confusing down there," Nancy replied, dropping onto the couch. She told them all about the chase through the tunnel and the strange notation on Goldman's calendar.

“Tomorrow we can go talk to Charlotte Andrews,” Nancy said. “Right after the finals.”

Deirdre leaned her head back and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Nancy asked.

“The conservatory called,” Bess said slowly. “Ms. Leggio and the committee have decided to postpone the violin portion of the finals by one day.”

“They want to see Brie and me in Ms. Leggio’s office tomorrow afternoon,” Deirdre said. “It doesn’t sound good.” Deirdre walked over to her bed and picked up her violin.

Nancy turned to Bess. “I’m not going to let them do this to her,” she whispered.

“You mean, *we’re* not going to let them,” Bess said firmly. “I’m going with you tomorrow.”

• • •

The following day, when the door to apartment 1F opened, Nancy and Bess were greeted by a silver-haired woman in her late fifties holding a cup of tea.

“Miss Charlotte Andrews?” Nancy asked. The woman smiled and nodded. “I’m Nancy Drew, and this is Bess Marvin. We’re friends of Deirdre Thompson’s.”

“Oh, how is Deirdre?” the secretary said eagerly. “I know her big competition is this week.”

“Well, actually, she’s not doing that well,” Nancy replied. “That’s part of the reason we’ve come to see you.”

“Please come in.” Miss Andrews led them into a well-lit room with a dining table and chairs.

“Now, what is the problem?” Miss Andrews asked.

“Someone has been trying to harm Deirdre,” Nancy explained. She mentioned some of the accidents and the theft of the final selection piece. “We’ve been trying to find out who and why,” Nancy went on. “Some of our clues point to Mr. Wells.”

“That’s impossible!” Miss Andrews sat up straight in her chair. “Why, Mr. Wells is very fond of the girl.”

“Mr. Goldman was doing some investigating of his own—and it led him to Deirdre and then to Karlan Peters,” Nancy continued.

“Did Mr. Goldman tell you what he suspected?” Miss Andrews asked.

“He would have,” Nancy said hesitantly, “but last night he was attacked and badly injured.”

Charlotte Andrews almost dropped her cup. “Is Martin all right?” she asked.

Nancy glanced at Bess before answering. “He’s in the hospital now, and the doctors think he has a good chance of recovering.”

Miss Andrews shook her head. “Poor Martin.”

“Miss Andrews,” Nancy said, “Mr. Goldman seemed to think something was going on at the office. Did you get the same feeling?”

Miss Andrews looked distressed. “I don’t know if I should—”

“Please, Miss Andrews,” Nancy pressed. “Mr. Goldman has already been hurt. Deirdre may be next.”

The secretary closed her eyes. “All right,” she replied finally. “I worked for Mr. Wells for almost twenty years. I suppose I know all his little habits. The pace was always hectic, but I never felt unappreciated. Recently, however, things changed. Mr. Wells became very moody—even more reclusive than before. Suddenly Mr. Peters was barking out orders and making us feel unwanted.”

“But Mr. Peters was Mr. Wells’s assistant. Hadn’t Mr. Peters been in charge of things all along?” Nancy asked.

Miss Andrews shook her head. “Not to that extent,” she said.

“Did *you* get along with Mr. Peters?” Bess asked.

“I’m sorry to say that I’ve known him for two years and I’ve never liked him much,” Miss Andrews replied.

“Mr. Wells seems to think highly of him.” Nancy said.

“Why not?” Miss Andrews replied. “At first Karlan worked late, every day. He even helped other employees with their workloads.” Miss Andrews sighed. “For a while we all thought he was going to fit in. But then things changed.”

Nancy leaned forward. "When was that?"

"About a month ago." Miss Andrews looked down at the carpet. "Mr. Peters became most unpleasant."

"What about Deirdre?" Bess asked. "Did he ever say anything about her?"

"That lovely young lady put a real spark into Mr. Wells," Miss Andrews said with a warm smile. "It was as if he'd found the grandchild he never had. Mr. Peters didn't seem to care about her one way or the other—until about three weeks ago."

"What happened then?" Nancy asked.

"Deirdre came to visit Mr. Wells, as she did from time to time. Soon after she left, Mr. Peters came out of Mr. Wells's office. He started to question me about her."

"And from then on, he disliked Deirdre?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," Miss Andrews replied. "In fact, he seemed to dislike everybody after that. A few weeks later, I received my notice."

"Did anyone give you a reason for letting you go?" Bess asked.

Miss Andrews shook her head. "Not really. And I didn't get to speak to Mr. Wells alone. Karlan Peters was there, doing most of the talking for him. I felt so angry, so hurt. I thought Mr. Wells respected me."

"When did they let Mr. Goldman go?" Nancy asked.

"Soon after I left," Miss Andrews replied. "They also replaced the chauffeur and the helicopter pilot with some rough-looking types."

"We've seen the chauffeur," Bess said.

Nancy was beginning to see a pattern. For the past few weeks, Karlan Peters had been practically running Wells Enterprises. And whatever hold he had on Raymond Wells had begun about a month ago.

"Did anything out of the ordinary happen about a month ago?" Nancy asked.

Miss Andrews shrugged. "Not really."

Nancy stood up and paced the floor. "I need a motive," she said in frustration. "One solid reason that will string all of these things together."

Suddenly Nancy stopped pacing. “String!” she cried. “Miss Andrews, when did Mr. Wells purchase the Stradivarius?”

The secretary seemed speechless. “How did you know about that?” she asked.

“Please, Miss Andrews,” Nancy said urgently. “That might be the key to everything.”

“The final papers were signed five weeks ago today,” Miss Andrews replied.

“That has to be it,” Nancy said excitedly. “Everything started happening right around that time.”

The Stradivarius, Nancy repeated to herself. There’s the motive. Not a music competition worth a few thousand dollars, but a violin worth millions. That could very easily be a reason to kill.

Strange Vocals

"We'll have to find out all we can about this violin deal," Bess said anxiously.

"The insurance company is handling the delivery arrangements," Nancy said. "I'm sure they won't tell us anything. They wouldn't even talk to Mr. Goldman."

"Do you think they told Mr. Wells much?" Bess asked.

"I don't know," Nancy said, running her fingers through her hair. "We need to speak to him."

"Maybe I can help," Miss Andrews offered. "I know his new secretary a bit. Perhaps she'd put me through, and then you could speak with him."

Nancy frowned. "It might work, if Karlan's hold on Wells isn't too strong," she said. "Either way, we have nothing to lose."

Charlotte Andrews quickly dialed Raymond Wells's private number.

"Hello, Ms. Thornton?" she asked when the secretary picked up. "This is Charlotte Andrews. Yes, it's nice to hear your voice, too."

Nancy and Bess exchanged hopeful glances.

"May I speak to Mr. Wells?" Charlotte asked. "It's very important and I—oh, I see."

Nancy and Bess listened anxiously as Miss Andrews chatted briefly with the secretary, then hung up.

"It seems," Miss Andrews said, "that Mr. Wells called this morning and said he wasn't coming in."

"Maybe he's not feeling well," Bess suggested.

"No," Miss Andrews corrected. "He didn't say he was sick. And Mr. Peters isn't coming in, either."

“Does Karlan Peters live at Mr. Wells’s mansion?” Nancy asked.

“No, but he does go out there on occasion,” Miss Andrews replied.

“Maybe they’re working out there today,” Bess suggested.

Charlotte continued, “Mrs. Thornton said that Mr. Wells forgot to cancel his appointments. He usually doesn’t forget things like that.”

Bess frowned. “Do you think Karlan Peters is trying to take over Mr. Wells’s company?”

“Probably not,” Nancy said. “He’d have to go through a lot of corporate legal maneuvers and appear before the board of directors.” She looked at her watch. “That reminds me—Deirdre is due in Ms. Leggio’s office shortly. We promised to be there.”

“Before you leave,” Charlotte Andrews said, her voice trembling slightly, “do you know what hospital Mr. Goldman was taken to?”

“Sure,” Nancy replied, then wrote down the name on a slip of paper.

Ms. Andrews saw the girls to the door. “If there’s anything I can do,” she said, “please don’t hesitate to call.”

“Thank you,” Nancy said. “You’ve been a great help.”

• • •

When they arrived at Ms. Leggio’s office, the girls found Deirdre sitting in the reception area.

Nancy had to admire the strong, determined air of her friend, although she knew it was partially an act.

“Where are your parents now?” Nancy asked Deirdre.

“I didn’t tell my folks about this,” Deirdre replied. “I couldn’t.”

Nancy sat down next to Deirdre. “What did you tell them about today’s competition?”

“That the violin segment had been postponed because someone was sick. It’s half true. I feel sick to my stomach.” Deirdre forced a laugh. “The committee is still conferring,”

Deirdre continued. "They'll call me in soon." She stood up and slowly paced the narrow room.

As Nancy watched her friend maneuver with her walking cane, she remembered how lost and confused she herself had felt in that dark tunnel. Could I adjust to blindness if I had to? Nancy wondered.

"Brie's in there now with Professor Jorgenson." Deirdre nodded toward Ms. Leggio's office. "Who knows what they're telling her." Deirdre pounded the tip of her cane against the floor. "Why are they doing this to me?" she said angrily.

Nancy rushed to her side. "I don't think Brie and the professor are behind this. At least, not all of it."

Deirdre frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Tell me about the first time Mr. Wells started acting differently toward you," Nancy said, leading Deirdre back to the couch.

Deirdre thought for a moment. "Well, I'd gone to see him at his office. He'd just returned from a business trip."

"Was Karlan Peters there?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, he was," Deirdre replied. "Mr. Wells and I started talking. I told him he should have taken better care of himself."

"Why did you say that?" Nancy pressed.

Deirdre shrugged. "He'd caught a cold or something. His voice sounded funny, and he was a little irritable."

"So then what happened?"

"Then Mr. Peters remembered an appointment they had, so I left."

"Anything else?" Nancy asked.

Deirdre thought again. "I told Charlotte to keep an eye on Mr. Wells and she said she would."

"So whatever hold Karlan has on Mr. Wells," Bess said slowly, "it must have started while they were on that business trip."

"Maybe," Nancy began. "But—"

Just then, the door to Ms. Leggio's office opened. A tall, dark-haired man stood in the doorway and said, "Would you please come in, Ms. Thompson?"

As Deirdre rose and walked into the inner office, Nancy grabbed Bess's arm and said, "Come on."

The two girls followed Deirdre into the room, stepping inside before the man could close the door.

Ms. Leggio, Brie, and several other people were seated around a small conference table. Nancy recognized several of them as teachers she had seen around the school. Professor Jorgenson was standing by a bookshelf near the table.

"What is the meaning of this?" Ms. Leggio demanded, glaring at Nancy and Bess.

"We're sorry for rushing in like this," Nancy said quickly. "But we've discovered some important information. Please allow me to speak."

The people around the table broke into hushed conversations. Then Professor Jorgenson stepped forward.

"Ms. Leggio, you know that Ms. Thompson and I have had our disagreements. But I can't believe she's guilty of cheating. I think we should listen to any statement that can be made on her behalf."

"You're all trying to protect her because of Mr. Wells!" Brie shouted. "Even *he* knows that Deirdre cheated!"

Everyone at the table gasped.

"And how do you know that?" Nancy shot at Brie.

"Because I was told by—"

"By Karlan Peters!" Nancy turned to face the others. "Mr. Peters has arranged a great many things in the past few weeks," she said.

"He's only been trying to keep her from taking advantage of his boss," Brie muttered.

"By killing her?" Nancy asked. "Someone left a trapdoor open on the stage while Deirdre was practicing. And someone sabotaged our elevator at Mr. Wells's building."

"Nancy was pushed in front of a train," Bess added. "And she was chased through the underground tunnels."

Nancy briefly explained about the tunnels and her conversation with Martin Goldman.

“Mr. Goldman suspected Karlan Peters of foul play, and his investigation led him to this conservatory.” Nancy turned to Deirdre. “Deirdre, did you ever tell Mr. Wells about Brie?”

“A few times I mentioned that we didn’t get along very well,” Deirdre replied. “And I told him how we were rivals in the competition.”

Nancy looked at Brie. “Karlan came to you and said he suspected Deirdre of using his boss. I’ll bet he even told you Deirdre was planning to cheat. And, after the theft of the final selection piece, wasn’t it Karlan who told you Deirdre had the envelope in her locker?”

Brie remained quiet. Everyone in the room looked at her.

“Brie,” Nancy said gently. “Didn’t Karlan Peters tell you the envelope was in Deirdre’s locker?”

“Yes.” Brie’s voice was barely audible. The blond girl looked completely defeated.

“Ms. Leggio, there has been a vicious campaign staged against Deirdre,” Nancy went on. “I think I know why, but I need time. Please don’t make any decisions yet.”

Ms. Leggio looked stunned. She and the committee members, including Professor Jorgenson, spoke quietly among themselves while the girls waited.

Nancy glanced at Deirdre. Her friend seemed to be holding her breath, anxiously awaiting the committee’s response.

Finally, Ms. Leggio turned to the girls. “We cannot ignore the fact that the envelope was found in Ms. Thompson’s locker. But,” the headmistress continued, “there have been some unusual circumstances connected with this competition. Also, Mr. Wells himself is not here to comment on the situation. Therefore, we will postpone making any decisions until this evening.”

Nancy sighed in relief.

“Ms. Drew, you have until tonight to produce evidence of Deirdre’s innocence,” Ms. Leggio said. “The competitions will conclude tomorrow, with or without Deirdre.”

Woodwinds

“We don’t have much time to prove Deirdre’s innocent,” Bess whispered to Nancy as they filed out of the office, Deirdre following.

“But I have an idea,” Nancy said. “Quick! Let’s find a cab.”

“Where are we going?” Deirdre and Bess asked at the same time.

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Nancy replied. “Deirdre, how many miles is it from here to Raymond Wells’s mansion?”

“I think it’s almost a hundred miles,” Deirdre said.

“Can we borrow your mother’s car?” Nancy asked.

“As long as she’s at her office, I’m sure she’ll let us use it,” Deirdre replied, following her friends out of the building.

Bess flagged down a cab, and the girls climbed in.

“Please hurry!” Nancy urged from the back seat of the cab after she gave the driver the destination.

“We’ll be at the square in five minutes,” the driver said. “What’s the big rush?”

“It’s the first stop on a long trip,” Deirdre said. “Mount Rainier is our final destination.”

“That’s a two-hour ride,” he said. “Are you going out there to catch some sights?”

No, Nancy thought, to catch a thief.

“Do you really think we’ll find what this mystery is all about by going to Raymond Wells’s mansion?” Deirdre asked anxiously.

“I’m pretty sure,” Nancy replied. “I also believe that something very important is scheduled to happen today.”

“What are we going to do when we get there?” Bess asked.

“Look around,” Nancy said. “Actually, I have an idea of what to expect, but it seems so crazy.”

“This whole case has been crazy!” Bess exclaimed.

“Here we are,” the driver announced, pulling up in front of an impressive office building. It was a modern steel-and-stone structure with tinted glass.

Bess hopped out of the cab. “I hope your mom will lend us her car without asking too many questions,” she said.

“So do I,” Deirdre said, stepping to the curb. “I don’t want to upset my parents any more than necessary.”

“What floor is she on?” Nancy asked as she paid the fare.

“The fifteenth,” Deirdre said. “Come on.”

Mrs. Thompson listened patiently as the girls told her about the theft at the school and about Deirdre’s being accused. None of the girls mentioned the attacks.

“All right, then,” Mrs. Thompson said, pulling her keys from her purse. “Come with me, and I’ll show you where my car is parked.

“May I use your phone?” Nancy asked.

“Go right ahead,” said Mrs. Thompson.

“I’ll meet you all out front,” Nancy said as she pulled a business card from her pocket and began dialing.

“Who are you calling?” Bess asked.

“Detective King,” Nancy replied. “Go catch up with the Thompsons. I’ll meet you outside.”

By the time Bess pulled up with Deirdre, Nancy was waiting by the curb.

“I’ll drive, you navigate,” she told Bess, sliding in behind the steering wheel. “Deirdre, where exactly are we going?”

“The mansion is at the base of Mount Rainier, just outside Ashford,” Deirdre said. “That’s on route 706. I’ve never been there.”

“We’ll find it soon enough,” Bess said, scanning a road map.

Two hours later the girls reached the turnoff for Mount Rainier.

They drove past large meadows filled with wild-flowers and forests of rich green pine. Mount Rainier's snowcapped peak glistened like a white crown against the blue sky.

During the drive Deirdre told Nancy and Bess every detail she could remember about the past few weeks. Nancy stopped her several times, asking her to repeat or clarify certain points. By the time they entered the town of Ashford, Nancy had put together much of her theory. "Now I'm more sure than ever that Karlan Peters is behind everything," she declared.

"But why would he want to ruin my chances at the competition?" Deirdre asked.

"It has nothing to do with the competition," Nancy replied. "Peters simply wanted to keep you away from Raymond Wells. The real target is the Stradivarius."

"I don't get it," Bess said. "What does Deirdre have to do with the Stradivarius?"

"I'll explain later," Nancy replied as she pulled up to a local store. "Right now, I have to make another call."

"Good," Bess said. "While you're doing that, I'll buy us some goodies."

Nancy found a pay phone just inside the doorway of the store. She dialed a number in Seattle and anxiously listened to it ring.

"King," came the voice on the other end.

"This is Nancy Drew again," Nancy said quickly. "Have you heard from the insurance company yet?"

"I, uh, have to admit, Miss Drew, I didn't call them right away." Detective King sounded embarrassed. "Actually, I wasn't going to call them at all, but then Martin Goldman regained consciousness."

"Is he all right?" Nancy asked.

"The doctors say he's looking good, but he's still got to rest awhile. Anyway," the detective went on, clearing his throat, "he was mumbling about Karlan Peters and some priceless violin. I remembered what you said and—"

"—you called the insurance company?" Nancy broke in impatiently.

“Yes,” Detective King replied. “They wouldn’t give me a straight answer over the phone, but they hinted that the Stradivarius would arrive somewhere within the next forty-eight hours.”

Nancy almost cheered. “That’s what I thought!”

“Look, if you really know what’s going on, you have to fill us in.”

“I will,” Nancy promised. “Very soon. We’re about twenty minutes from Raymond Wells’s mansion. I’m sure that I’ll be able to fill in all the blanks before long.”

Nancy said goodbye and hung up the phone. Bess was already heading toward the car with an armload of snacks.

“Did you say Mr. Wells lives on Snow Mountain Road?” Nancy asked Deirdre when she reached the car.

“That’s right. My folks and I were going to drive up here once. Dad checked the map and said the route went straight through town. We take the first right, I think.”

“I just hope we’re in time,” Nancy said.

“Why are you so sure something is happening today?” Bess asked.

As she drove, Nancy told them about her conversation with Detective King. “And Martin Goldman had his calendar opened to today’s date. He wrote ‘C. Fiddler—Posies’ on the page.”

“I don’t get it,” Deirdre said.

“It was a code,” Nancy explained. “Mr. Goldman always referred to the violin as a fiddle. Somehow, he found out when the Stradivarius was being delivered. I’m not sure about the posy part, though.”

Nancy took the turn onto Snow Mountain Road. It didn’t take the girls long to locate the Wells mansion. It was set way back from the road, surrounded by a high electrified fence and gate.

“Wow, what a place!” Bess exclaimed.

“What does it look like?” Deirdre asked.

“Well, it’s a large white brick building,” Bess continued, “with huge windows and a black slate roof.”

“There’s a stone archway over the front door,” Nancy added. “The doors look like polished oak, and there are two tall, trimmed spruce trees on either side of the entrance.”

Deirdre was impressed. “It sounds wonderful,” she said. “Is there anything else?”

“I’ll say there is,” Nancy said. “A long driveway runs up and around the house—and there’s a large silver limousine in front. It looks like there are people here.”

Nancy drove past the mansion and parked the car just down the road. Then she and the girls made their way through a thick tangle of leaves and broken branches.

“Look!” Bess gasped, as they ducked behind some shrubbery across from the gate. “Someone’s coming out.”

The girls watched as the gates opened automatically. A florist truck drove out and pulled onto the road.

“That’s strange,” Bess said. “The address on the van says Tacoma, Washington. Why wouldn’t Mr. Wells order flowers from a florist right in town?”

“Mr. Wells wouldn’t order flowers at all,” Deirdre said. “He’s allergic to them.”

“C. Fiddler . . . posies,” Nancy muttered. “Violin . . . flowers. It’s here!”

Bess looked astonished. “You mean the violin was just delivered in that flower truck?”

“Yes,” Nancy said with a frown. “If only we could get inside that mansion. But with all that electronic surveillance, I don’t see how—”

“Oh, it can be arranged.” The threatening voice was accompanied by the sound of a gun hammer clicking.

The girls turned slowly to find Mr. Wells’s muscular chauffeur standing behind them with a rifle in his hands. “Getting in is easy,” he sneered. “But getting out’s not likely.”

Dangerous Duet

The burly chauffeur silently led the three girls through the front gate and into the mansion. They climbed a flight of winding stairs to the second floor and walked down a carpeted corridor.

"In here," he ordered, pointing the rifle toward a set of white paneled doors.

Nancy turned the ornate brass handles and stepped inside.

"Deirdre!" Karlan Peters exclaimed, as if he were happy to see her. Dressed in a tailored black suit, he stood like a gaunt shadow in the center of the den. "And Miss Drew and her pretty blond friend. My, but you are persistent young ladies. Or should I say, nosy ones."

Nancy spotted Raymond Wells sitting at a fancy slate-and-chrome desk. He looked nervous, wringing his hands, not at all like a man of wealth and power. He kept glancing back and forth between her and Karlan Peters.

"Mr. Wells looks upset," Bess whispered to Nancy.

"He's not himself," Nancy muttered, glancing around the large room. One entire wall was a picture window that looked out on the forest and Mount Rainier. The door behind them seemed to be the only one into the room. Unfortunately, the burly chauffeur with the gun was guarding it.

"Mr. Wells and I were just about to celebrate a very special occasion," Karlan said. "Would you care to join us? It may be your last chance," he added with a laugh.

Nancy stepped forward. "We'd be happy to celebrate with Raymond Wells," she said. "But that man sitting there isn't him."

"Nancy!" Bess gasped.

The strained expression on Karlan's face told Nancy her deduction was right. "I knew you would be trouble from the moment you spoiled my little trapdoor trick," Karlan said, frowning.

"You did that to me?" Deirdre asked in disbelief.

Karlan Peters smiled. "That's right. And the elevator, and the torn jacket, and—" Karlan turned his icy gaze on Nancy. "And that little romp through the underground. You're quite quick on your feet, I must say, Miss Drew."

"Do we have to play games with these girls?" the man at the desk asked. "Why can't we just—"

"Nancy, you're right," Deirdre broke in. "That's not Mr. Wells's voice."

"Right you are!" Karlan Peters proclaimed. "I knew you would eventually figure that out." He seemed to be enjoying himself. "From that first afternoon, when you mentioned that Wells's voice sounded strange, I knew it was only a matter of time before you caught on." He whirled on Nancy. "But how did *you* know?"

"I had only two other suspects," Nancy said. "Brie Hollister and Professor Jorgenson. I believed they might sabotage Deirdre's chances to win the competition, but I didn't think either one would try to kill her."

"I see," he said, still smiling.

"We thought you wanted to drive Deirdre away," Nancy continued, "to save your boss from being used. But that wasn't reason enough to kill someone either."

Karlan strolled across the room and sat on the edge of the desk. "So you went looking for a stronger motive?"

Nancy nodded. "That's right." She could feel her friends beside her trembling with fear. The chauffeur's gun was pointed straight at their backs, and the snakelike stare from Karlan Peters didn't help.

But Nancy knew she had to be calm. She needed time to find an escape. And to find the real Raymond Wells—if the millionaire was still alive.

“When were you sure it was me?” Karlan Peters asked. “I’m curious.”

“When I added Mr. Goldman’s and Ms. Andrews’s stories to Deirdre’s observations about *your* Raymond Wells.”

The phony Wells rose from the desk. “Peters, let’s get rid of these kids. All of this delay is making me nervous.”

Karlan held up his hand, signaling the man to be quiet. “I felt certain that Paul here” — Karlan nodded toward the fake Wells — “would be able to fool everyone. He looked just like Raymond. For months he practiced his signature, his mannerisms, even his voice. But he had trouble talking to Deirdre that day.”

“His voice didn’t convince me,” Deirdre said.

“Then he was the one who tried to impersonate Mr. Goldman on the phone,” Nancy added. “I wasn’t fully convinced, either.” Karlan sighed. “I’d planned this whole thing for over a year. At first, I was merely going to find someone to impersonate Wells and milk the company dry.” He sighed. “I would have been a wealthy man. And had all of that power, too.”

“So that’s why you became so friendly with Charlotte and the rest of Mr. Wells’s staff,” Nancy said. “You were gathering information.”

“That’s right,” Karlan said. “But you had to spoil it, Deirdre!” He slammed his fist on the desk. “Anyway, I knew we couldn’t act this little scheme out for long, even with you out of the picture. So I decided to go for one big score.”

Karlan Peters reached down beside the desk and picked up an antique violin case, then opened it. The rich wood veneer of the instrument, several hundred years old, gleamed in the light.

“This baby is worth millions,” Peters said. “And now I have it.”

“Yes,” the phony Wells said gruffly. “You have it. Now let’s get out of here.”

Karlan Peters’s face grew red with anger. “You don’t understand, Paul. We have to leave, yes. But we can’t leave anyone behind to tell our little secret. Not Wells, not anyone.”

Karlan nodded to the man with the gun. "Denny, take these girls to the wine cellar to meet the real Mr. Wells—"

"He's still alive!" Deirdre cried.

"For another half hour, at least." Peters leered. "Then Denny will set a convenient fire that will completely destroy this house. He really is quite good at that. Better than he is at monorails and rooftops."

"Or stealing envelopes from private offices," Nancy added.

Karlan walked up to Nancy, standing in front of her so that they were eye-to-eye. The fragrance of his cologne was overpowering. "Goodbye, Miss Drew. You were a remarkably intelligent and resourceful young lady."

Then he looked over at Deirdre. "And goodbye to you, Miss Thompson. Oddly enough, I enjoyed your music. It's a pity you won't be playing anymore."

Deirdre raised her cane to strike him, but Nancy stopped her. "Take it easy, Deirdre," she whispered. "We'll get out of this."

Peters laughed. "Take them away, Denny."

The man with the gun nodded, then herded the girls out of the room. He led them back down the hallway toward the staircase. Bess walked alongside Deirdre, holding her hand, with Nancy behind them. The man with the gun brought up the rear. He stopped them at the top of the stairs. "When you reach the bottom, open that door on the right."

"That's the wine cellar?" Nancy asked.

"Yep." Denny nudged her forward.

Nancy's mind was racing. She knew that once they were in the cellar, their chances of escape were slim.

She scanned the stairway, looking for anything that would help get them out of their predicament. Then she saw the long drop over the rail, and a desperate plan came to her.

She slowed her pace, allowing Deirdre and Bess to move farther down the stairs.

"Get going," Denny ordered, nudging Nancy in the back.

Nancy descended a few steps, keeping the burly man close behind her. Then she stopped again. "I can't," she whined.

“I said *move!*” Denny went to shove her again, and Nancy ducked. The huge man, one step above her, lost his balance and fell forward.

Nancy quickly jumped up, catching Denny under his stomach. Then, pushing with all her might, she sent him flying over the railing. The gun sailed from his hand as he crashed through a hard wooden table below.

Nancy hurried Deirdre and Bess down the stairs. Denny was still lying on the ground, moaning.

“Get Deirdre out of here,” Nancy ordered Bess. “The gate security code is six-six-nine-oh. I watched Denny punch it in when he brought us here. Run back to the car and go for help!”

“What are you going to do?” Bess looked terrified.

“I’m going to find Mr. Wells,” Nancy replied.

“We can’t leave you here,” Deirdre protested.

“And we can’t leave Mr. Wells here,” Nancy said. “He’s their greatest threat. Now *go!*”

Bess and Deirdre hesitated, then ran out the front door as Nancy hurried down into the cellar.

At the bottom of the steps Nancy found herself in a small room. The walls and floors were gray stone. On one side of the room a furnace and circuit breakers had been installed. Before her was a huge stone and brick cavern. Nancy could see several large wine caskets set in rows along the cavern walls.

Picking up a heavy-duty extension cord from the floor, Nancy ran back up the stairs. She tied one end of the cord around the door handle and the rest around the banister.

That will delay them a bit, she thought, running back down. Now, where was Raymond Wells?

“Mr. Wells!” Nancy called out.

At first there was no response. Then she heard banging on a door across the room. “Mr. Wells!” she called through the door.

“Yes,” came a weak reply. “Who are you?”

“I’m a friend of Deirdre’s,” Nancy explained, removing her lock-picking set from her pocket. “I’ll have you out soon.”

The old lock gave way quickly, and the door opened. A very disheveled Raymond Wells emerged. He looked tired and weak. His hair was wild and uncombed, and his eyes looked weary. Nancy was stunned at the resemblance between the man and his imposter.

“Thank you,” Mr. Wells said, trying to gain his balance.

“We’re not out of trouble yet,” Nancy told him. Almost on cue, she heard banging and shouting at the cellar door.

“That cord won’t hold for long,” she warned. “Is there any other way out of here?”

Mr. Wells shook his head. “I’m afraid not. It was sealed up years ago when the wine caskets were brought in.”

Upstairs, the wooden cellar door began to crack. Karlan Peters and Wells’s imposter would burst inside at any moment.

Desperately, Nancy rushed Mr. Wells toward the circuit breakers. She studied the three electric cables that ran down the wall and into the circuit control box. It just might work, she thought.

Then Nancy turned and looked at the room and the caverns beyond. With nothing to lose, she picked up a sturdy wooden pole and jammed it behind the power cables.

She pulled with all of her might. The cable snapped free, with a terrible cracking sound, just as footsteps sounded on the stairs: For a few seconds, the entire basement was a fireworks display of colored sparks and flashes.

Then everything went black.

Grand Finale

“Peters, don’t push. I can’t see!”

Nancy recognized the voice of the phony Raymond Wells. Suddenly, he screamed and came crashing down the stairs.

“Stay behind me,” Nancy whispered to Mr. Wells. The millionaire tapped on her shoulder to let her know he was behind her, and the two of them stood perfectly still.

“Paul, you idiot!” Peters shouted. He came down the steps slowly. “Turn on the lights.”

“I can’t,” Paul groaned. “They blew out the circuits.”

“Then get a flashlight!” Peters snapped.

“I don’t know where they are,” Paul grumbled. “The servants do, and you sent them off today so they wouldn’t be here for the delivery.”

Karlan Peters was silent for a moment. “Well, Denny will recover soon. Then it will be three to two, in our favor.”

Nancy could hear the two men moving around in the dark. They were definitely searching for her, and they probably had weapons.

She gripped the wooden pole and hoped it would be enough. Nancy thought of Deirdre and how her friend had shown her and Bess how to move without sight back in her apartment. Nancy closed her eyes and tried to visualize the space.

If her memory was right, the cavern entrance was just to her left. At the right moment, she would try to guide herself and Mr. Wells through it.

Suddenly, Nancy heard scuffling noises in the darkness. She signaled Wells to hold still. The scent of Karlan’s cologne was strong in her nostrils. He was very close.

Slowly, carefully, Nancy crouched down and held the pole out to the left of her body. If Karlan was on her right, she'd know in a minute.

A second later, Nancy swung with all her might. Karlan Peters yelped in pain and fell to the floor. "My leg. She got me in the leg!"

Keeping Raymond Wells behind her, and using the stick like a walking cane, Nancy hurried Mr. Wells in the direction of the cavern. They stumbled and bumped into a casket as they entered.

Using the stick, Nancy tapped the huge wooden caskets as they moved through the dark. Then she pulled Mr. Wells into a space between the third and fourth barrels and waited.

Someone had followed them into the cavern. Nancy could hear whoever it was coming along the same route, slowly, not sure where she and Wells were hiding.

Wells was panting for breath behind her. He was trying to be quiet, but he was obviously weak from his ordeal. They had to get out of the basement.

Suddenly, Nancy had another idea. The wine caskets were about five feet long and lying on their sides on bracings.

Quickly, she wedged her stick between two bracings about ankle high. Then she eased Wells and herself to the opposite end. The second she heard someone near their hiding spot, she coughed. She heard Paul turn in to their hiding space and come rushing forward. Then he tripped over the stick and, crying out, went crashing to the floor.

Without hesitation, Nancy led Wells out the other end. She felt her way back along the kegs until they were in the small room again.

The stairs were to the left, she remembered. Reaching out, she felt the banister. Nancy and Wells were halfway up the stairs when Wells shouted, "He's got me!"

Nancy reached back and felt Karlan's grip on the millionaire's arm. Lashing out with her foot, she caught Karlan in the leg, sending him backward.

Holding on to Wells, Nancy turned to run to the top of the stairs. Then she stopped as the blinding beam of a white light hit her eyes.

“Get them, Denny!” Karlan Peters shouted.

“Denny won’t be getting anyone, Mr. Peters,” Bess Marvin said from the top of the stairs. “And if you wait right there, these policemen will come down and get *you*.”

• • •

Within half an hour, Bess and Deirdre were standing in the main foyer, excitedly explaining to Nancy and Raymond Wells how they had met up with Sheriff Simmons.

“He saw us running for the car,” Bess said.

“Talk about the cavalry arriving in time,” Deirdre chimed in.

“A detective named King called us from the city about half an hour ago,” said the sheriff, a short, red-haired man. “He told us that some Goldman guy had come to and warned him about Peters. King knew you were out here, so he called us.”

“All I can say is I’m forever thankful to you girls for saving my life.” Raymond Wells hugged Deirdre and shook hands with Nancy and Bess.

“If we can get everybody down to the station house,” Sheriff Simmons said, opening the door, “we’ll take your statements.”

“Sounds good to me,” Nancy said. “And after that, we have to call Ms. Leggio at the conservatory and get back to Seattle.” She linked her arm with Deirdre’s. “You have to get some rest.”

“That’s right, Didi,” Bess said. “You have a big day tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry,” Raymond Wells said. “I’ll get you three back to the city in style.”

• • •

The violin portion of the Sabatini competition belonged to Deirdre. Her music soared, and every precise note was filled with energy and emotion.

When she had finished, the whole audience gave her a standing ovation.

“She was wonderful,” said Bess, wiping a tear from her eye.

“She sure was,” Nancy agreed. She looked over at Deirdre’s parents, who were standing on the other side of Bess. Mrs. Thompson looked as if she were about to cry, too, and her husband was beaming.

When Ms. Leggio announced that the violin award would go to Deirdre Thompson, no one seemed surprised—not even Brie Hollister.

“You deserve it,” Brie told Deirdre when the competition had ended and the crowd was filing out of the auditorium. She and Deirdre were standing by the stage with Nancy and Bess. “You’re really good,” Brie went on. “I can’t believe what I did to you. I wanted this award so badly, I guess I lost track of everything else. I’m sorry, Deirdre. Please forgive me.”

“Things got pretty out of hand,” Deirdre admitted to Brie. “But it’s over now.”

“Do you think we could be friends from now on?” Brie asked shyly.

Deirdre stuck out her hand. “We can try.”

Brie said her goodbyes to everyone, then went to join Scott Frazier.

“Perhaps now is a good time for me to speak to you.” The girls looked up in surprise to see Professor Jorgenson standing beside them.

Nancy was even more surprised to see his daughter Elaine with him.

“Deirdre, Brie wasn’t the only one who became obsessed with winning,” he admitted. “I pushed my own daughter to succeed at all cost and drove her away. I almost did the same thing to you.” The professor put his arm around Elaine, who smiled up at him. “Today she has offered to give me another chance,” he went on. “I would be grateful if you could do the same.”

Again Deirdre extended her hand in friendship. “I’d rather learn from you than run from you,” she said with a grin.

Professor Jorgenson smiled back. "It's a deal," he said.

A number of people came over to congratulate Deirdre. Then a few reporters began asking her questions and taking pictures for the local papers.

When Deirdre finally returned from the dressing room some time later, Bess, Nancy, and the Thompsons were waiting—along with someone else.

"You were wonderful," Mr. Wells told Deirdre.

"Thank you," Deirdre said, her face shining. "You watched the finals then?"

"Of course," Mr. Wells replied. "I sneaked in and sat in back. I would say you won almost everything you deserve."

"Almost?" Bess exclaimed. Nancy raised an eyebrow.

"The scholarship will help you with your studies," the millionaire continued. "But when you feel ready to launch your career, I'll be there to introduce you to people—"

"Thank you, Mr. Wells," Deirdre interrupted, "but I don't want anything from you, honest. That's what Karlan Peters thought."

"I know you want to earn your own way, and I won't interfere," Mr. Wells said. "I'm offering to help you get auditions, not jobs. That will be up to you."

Deirdre smiled. "I appreciate that very much," she said.

"However, there is one other thing I feel you have earned," Mr. Wells said.

Nancy, Bess, and the Thompsons watched as Raymond Wells reached into a leather case on the chair next to him. He pulled out the Stradivarius violin and placed it in Deirdre's hands.

"This instrument was created to make music. Would you do us the honor of playing it for us?"

Deirdre took the violin very carefully and placed it beneath her chin. "I'd like to play for the person who saved my life, and my future," she said, raising the bow. "This is one of my own compositions—for Nancy Drew."

Deirdre began to play a beautiful piece filled with excitement and a touch of mystery.

“It’s perfect,” Bess said, grinning at Nancy. “That song is definitely you.”

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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